Masters of Noir Volume Two

A Mystery Anthology

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NOIR MASTER SERIES

* * *
GREEN EYES by HAL ELLSON

No sound, no movement anywhere, then a perceptible awakening. A breath of wind, a palm frond moving, and shadows thickening below the hotel balcony. Jim Withers sat forward and watched the white-clad figure climbing the steep road toward the hotel. Even at that distance he recognized the man and frowned. In another moment he leaned forward again and nodded his head in sign of grudging respect for the one in white. The chap was running up the hill.

But why not? The natives were capable of feats that could stun, if not kill, anyone else. But this Juan ... Jim sat back once more and wiped the perspiration from his face. The wind had faded, evening brought no relief from the fierce tropic heat. He closed his eyes, steps on the tiled floor alerted him. Seconds later a pair of cool hands pressed against his eyes. An exotic bouquet floated around him.

As he broke free and turned, Kathy smiled, beautiful and cool-looking in white. “Lazy-bones, sleeping again?” she said.

"No, thinking of when we're leaving this place."

"But how can you say that? I could stay forever in Acapulco."

"Then it'll have to be without me."

"Fresh,” she said and laughed in a way that set his pulse racing. A wild surging desire made him want to crush her in his arms, but she stepped back, as if she had read his mind, and said, “We’d better dine, don’t you think?”

"Have to wash up,” he mumbled, rising from the chair. Then, escorting her as far as the stairs, he went to their room, washed quickly and hurried to the upper balcony.

In that brief interval a swift transition had taken place. The night had closed in, a vast canopy stretched overhead; on the slope of the hill below the balcony nothing but silence.

Jim sat down abruptly. “You're out of sorts,” Kathy said, watching him.

"No, it's the heat,” he lied. For he could bear with that, but to have found Juan with Kathy was too much. As Juan had gone back to the kitchen, Jim said, “He's altogether too friendly.”

Kathy opened her eyes wide, innocently. “You mean Juan?”

"And who else would I be talking about?"

"Oh, he doesn't mean anything. He's just friendly.” She was smiling now. “But don't tell me—it's not really jealousy.”

"Jealousy, hell!"

"Hush."

_warned, Jim turned his head. Others were arriving. A table for two. He nodded to the couple and turned back to Kathy.

"From Michigan. They motored down. Very nice people,” she whispered.

Then Juan appeared from the kitchen bearing a large tray. He smiled. “And how are you this evening, Mr. Withers?” His white teeth flashed, his smooth brown skin gleamed. Not a drop of sweat on his face after that run up the hill.

Jim nodded, unable to speak. Juan set him on edge. All eyes for Kathy as he served, his words directed at her. She appeared delighted by his attention.
"Are you going fishing tomorrow?"

Both of them were looking at Jim now and he appeared almost stunned.

"I hadn't thought of it for tomorrow," he finally answered.

"But why wait?"

"Yes, why wait?" said Kathy. "Wasn't it one of the reasons you came?"

"If you go in a big boat," Juan was saying, "very big fish. Sailfish, swordfish, anything you can name."

"And any price the boatman can name too."

"Ah, but you are rich."

Kathy laughed with delight at this remark.

"All Americans are not rich, particularly this one," said Jim.

Exchanging glances with Kathy, Juan only smiled and said, "If you wish, I can make the necessary arrangements."

Jim finally conceded. "All right, tomorrow, at what time?"

"At six it is best for hooking the big ones."

"Make it seven."

Juan shrugged. "As you wish. The boys will be waiting at Caleta Beach. Ask for Rodriquez."

Juan returned to the kitchen. Voices in heated argument made Jim turn. No door to the kitchen. He saw a barefooted Indian woman—the cook—berating Juan.

"That old devil's at it again."

"Well, she has work to do and he's holding her up."

"I still don't like her."

"And him?"

Kathy's eyes widened. "But don't be silly, Jim. He's cute, that's all."

Jim picked up his fork, not caring to pursue the subject. The food was excellent, as always, not to be ignored.

"You know," he said, "that's the most remarkable thing about this place."

"What is?"

"The food. No two meals alike, a kind of endless variety and perfection."

"I hate to admit it, but the old she-devil does wonders."

"Probably no one appreciates it, either."

At that moment Juan arrived back at the table, apparently not upset by the argument with the cook. "A bottle of Bohemia," said Jim. "And if you don't mind, tell the cook that my wife and I are in love with her cooking."

After what had taken place, another man would have at least hesitated before such a request, but Juan smiled, as if sharing in the compliment, and went immediately to the kitchen. Watching, Jim saw the Indian woman turn her ugly
pock-marked face and smile at him.

Juan returned with the bottle of Bohemia. As Jim poured the light golden beer, he said, “Coming along tomorrow, Kathy?”

"Fishing? Are you out of your mind, Jim?"

"It was just an idea."

2.

After dinner, a few couples gathered on the lower balcony. Intensely dark now, a soft wind from the sea, palms stirring, the lizards darting at insects lured by the lights. Utter silence in the shadowed jungle on the slope below the balcony.

Kathy had left with the other couples to join the Canasta players in the lobby. Jim leaned over the railing. Looking down, he saw a light flash. Nothing then, but he knew of the forlorn native shacks hidden below. The cook, and perhaps Juan lived in one of them.

Jim turned away, thought of Juan rousing his anger. What does Kathy see in him? he asked himself, starting for the hall that led to the lobby. There he found the Canasta players at their tables but not Kathy. Gone to the room, he thought, and he walked through the open lobby, then down the front steps.

Palms shadowed the driveway. A night-bird cried out. About to light a cigarette, Jim turned and saw a white-clad figure jump from the small balcony of his own room and quickly disappear. In the next second he turned round, mounted the steps and hurried through the lobby.

"Kathy?" The door was locked. He rattled the knob. Footsteps, and the door swung open. No light in the room. He flipped the switch and stared at Kathy.

"Thought you were going to play cards?" he said, watching her eyes.

"I changed my mind and decided to lie down for a while."

Yes, with Juan, he thought. But when she stared innocently at him he went out to the balcony, dropped in a chair and lit a cigarette.

"What are you going to do out there?" Kathy asked.

"Sleep. I've a big day ahead tomorrow. Wish you'd come along."

No answer from Kathy.

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing, I suppose."

"Perhaps I better not go."

"Don't spoil your fun because of me."

"Thanks." That said as if he meant it. Then: “Look, why not meet me at the beach with the camera just in case I hook a big one."

"What time?"

"Noon."

"I'll be there."
Hearing the door open, he turned and saw her smiling at him. “Now where are you going?” he asked.

“Canasta, dear. Bye!”

The door closed. He shot his cigarette away. Kathy had lied. He didn’t want to believe it, the two of them together. A wild thought entered his mind. Capable of murder. He knew that now, but it was insane. Get away, he told himself. The plane to Mexico City tomorrow, anything to escape the precipice lying near in the dark.

A night-bird cried out in the palms, a wind from the sea. He closed his eyes, slept and woke again to that same mournful cry. Now stillness, everything dead, asleep. Turning, he saw a figure in white vanish behind a palm; he tried to rise and his tired eyes closed.

3.

He opened them again to the clear tropic light and profound stillness of morning, looked at his watch, stood up, passed through the shadowed room, empty lobby and hurried down the hill toward the beach. Halfway there and he met the Indian cook; a mirrored light flashed from a machete that hung from her waist. She smiled. He smiled in turn, passed on, hurrying.

No one at the beach. He lit a cigarette. Ask for Rodriguez? As if provoked by this thought, the quiet beach came to life. A group of beach-boys arrived. One approached Jim and he said, “Are you Rodriguez?”

“Si. You are ready?”

Jim nodded. Rodriguez barked an order. One of the boys plunged into the water and swam out to a boat at anchor. Rodriguez himself took off barefooted and returned with two fishing poles. Meanwhile the boat had been brought in close to the beach. Jim and Rodriguez climbed aboard. The motor started, the boat backed away, turned and headed for the open sea.

Under other circumstances, the trip alone would have been worthwhile, but Jim was preoccupied. Himself out here, Juan didn’t have to climb the balcony. Knock on the door, walk in and strip for action, he thought.

A strike and his line went taut, the pole bent. Excited, the beach-boys rose to their feet. Far astern the placid surface of the sea broke as the fish that had struck jumped clear and flashed in the brilliant sunlight. Minutes later the fish was boated.

“A durado,” one of the beach-boys pronounced it and with a blow from a club stilled it forever.

One more strike, and thereafter the sea gave up nothing. Only the scenery now, great cliffs with the sea battering them, then miles of beach and white surf wild and booming like cannon. Jim barely took notice, his mind on Kathy and Juan. He had been tricked and couldn’t wait to get back.

At noon the boat nosed against the beach. Jim came ashore, eyes searching for Kathy. Rodriguez handed him his catch. Fifty yards away he saw Juan squatting on the back of his legs and Kathy lying on the sand. He dropped the fish, started forward, fists clenched. The sun was blinding, he began to run, caught himself.

I’m going mad, he thought, and he was gasping when he stood over Kathy. Juan was standing now. Kathy smiled at him. “Ah, your husband is back,” said Juan.

“Didn’t you catch anything?” Kathy asked.

“No luck."

“As I said, you must leave early for the big ones,” Juan put in and, excusing himself, he walked off toward the hotel.

Kathy lay back on the sand again, aware that Jim was staring at her. “Angry that you caught nothing?”

“Not about that.”
"What then? My boy friend? There, you are jealous?" She laughed, pleased with herself.

"It's nothing to laugh about."

"Oh, come now, you're old enough to know better."

"I wonder," he said casually. And to himself: I wonder how long it's gone on?

Evening on the balcony with Juan serving, and a new air about him that smacked of amused assurance which Jim found aggravating. He showed it, too, but to no avail. Juan's usual argument with the cook ensued. But back he came to the table in the same high mood—and with a new suggestion—a trip into the jungle. "Not quite for a lady," he added. "But I am sure you would enjoy it," he said to Jim.

It was obvious enough now that they wanted him out of the way, Jim realized, but he wondered if they took him for a fool. This time there would be no trip. But suddenly he changed his mind. It was insane, yet he made the decision quickly, saying, "I suppose it would be interesting."

"Something to remember after you leave," said Juan. "You won't regret it."

Jim looked at Kathy. "Oh, go along," she urged. "I wouldn't have you miss it for the world,"

"But what will you do?"

"Occupy myself." This as she looked directly at him, as if deliberately flaunting him.

"Your wife is very obliging. An admirable quality," Juan smiled. Jim was afraid to look up, wanting to bash the fellow.

"It's an all-day trip," said Juan. "A man named Varga will pick you up at nine."

"Good. Bring me a Bohemia," said Jim, this to get rid of Juan. Then he looked at Kathy. She was lighting a cigarette, poised and cool-looking while he soaked in his own sweat.

What am I doing? he thought. Giving her to him. Trying to torture myself? The trip was a foolish idea, and yet behind the madness—method.

"Anything wrong?" Kathy asked.

"Just thinking."

"You're not going to change your mind about the jungle trip?"

"Does it matter if I do?"

"Of course. Don't let me spoil your fun. I'll be perfectly content here—and no one will steal me."

He felt she was laughing at him and almost exploded. Tomorrow will tell, he thought. Things are beginning to square. That made him smile, and Kathy asked why.

"It won't be long now."

"Meaning?"

"All sorts of things, mostly that we'll be flying home."

"I hate the thought of it. Aren't you going to miss all this?"
"A bit. What particularly will you miss?" he asked, feeling almost malicious now.

"Oh, everything. When are we coming back?"

"That all depends."

"On what?"

"Several things, my dear," and he smiled, seeing her frown.

They finished dining and went to the balcony below. Then Kathy joined the card players. Jim didn't mind, for he wanted to think and the coolest place was the balcony.

5.

Later, he sought the lobby but didn't see Kathy. He went to their room and knocked. No answer. For a moment anger assailed him, then he managed to grin, knowing she was with Juan. Stupid little Kathy, he thought. Quickly he turned round, passed through the lobby and down the front steps. The road curved and darkened under the palms; up ahead he thought he saw something white disappear in the shadows. Then Kathy emerged from the darkness.

"Hello, what are you doing out here?"

Kathy advanced, then stood face to face with him. "Taking a breath of air. It was stifling inside." Perfectly poised, she raised a cigarette to her lips for him to light it.

"Dangerous walking this road at night," he said calmly as he struck a match. Her face was caught in the light, innocent. She smiled.

"Worried about me?"

"A bit." He dropped the match and added, "Terrible job you did on your mouth. Your lipstick is smeared. Here." He gave her his handkerchief and turned round. Up ahead, he again thought he saw a white shadow turn the curve in the road and he quickened his steps. A tall man in white entered the hotel.

"You're walking so fast," Kathy complained.

"Sorry."

He slowed his steps till they reached the lobby where Kathy joined the card players. Then he went to a rear balcony and found a tall man in white leaning against the railing, another waiter.

"Ah, Alfredo."

"Good evening, Mr. Withers!"

"It is very hot."

"Yes, very hot."

"Hotter when one walks fast."

Alfredo lifted his head and dropped his cigarette.

"You warned them, didn't you?" Jim said, and his hand went to his pocket. Alfredo stiffened, then saw the crisp bill in the hand extended toward him.

"I was asked to," he said, accepting the money and shrugging his shoulders.

"Who asked you?"

"I see. And suppose I asked you to do something?"

"I should have to consider."

Alfredo's meaning was clear, and Jim was already prepared with a sheaf of pesos. Handing them over, he named a cafe in the city and said, “I'll be there all day tomorrow. If Juan should happen to go to my room, telephone me immediately. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Alfredo answered with a smile, and Jim turned and walked away, everything clear in his mind, too. Kathy and Juan expected him to go on the jungle trip. Which gave them all day to themselves, the leisure of time and freedom. Jim grinned unpleasantly. If Alfredo called, he could make it back to the hotel in ten minutes with a fast taxi.

Kathy was still in the lobby. With a glance toward her, he went to their room and turned in. It was stifling and close, yet he managed to fall asleep.

6.

Morning and he left the room, Kathy asleep yet. Foregoing breakfast, he sought out the guide, said he had changed his mind about the trip, tipped him well and took a taxi into the city.

There he bought a three-week-old New York paper and found an outdoor table at the cafe. Morning passed, the heat blazed. Noon and he retreated to the cooler interior of the cafe. With the siesta, the streets emptied and came to life afterward. Jim sat outside again, nerves ragged, patience worn. He had changed from coca cola to brandy and soda. Time oozed, the phone call from Alfredo never came.

At five, he gave up waiting, hailed a taxi, drove back to the hotel and sought out Alfredo who met him with a smile that made him want to smash his face in.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Withers, but there was no need to phone."

An obvious lie, but it was too late to do anything about it. “How much did you ask of the lady for not phoning me?” said Jim.

"Your wife? But she knew nothing. I went to Juan and he offered more than you.” Alfredo smiled and shrugged. “Of course you want your money back."

"Keep it," Jim snarled, walking away.

The shower was running when he entered the room. He slammed the door shut and Kathy called out: “How was the trip, darling?"

"Wonderful. I didn't go."

"You didn't?" The pattering and splashing ceased in the bathroom. Towel around her, Kathy came out to find Jim standing at the door to the balcony, his face flushed and sweated, his eyes like glass.

"I don't understand," she said.

"There's nothing to understand. I didn't go because I met a party from New York. We went to a cafe and talked."

"And drank."

"So what? As long as you enjoyed yourself."

"I didn't exactly pine away."
Still acting, flippant now. He wanted to knock her little head off. Why in hell did I marry her? he asked himself. But he knew why and turned away, going to the bathroom to shower himself. “I'll meet you on the upper balcony,” he said.

Kathy was waiting for him and, as usual, Juan was at the table. He bowed, smiled at Jim, drew out his chair, and suddenly the cook began screaming at him from the kitchen. She was brandishing an ugly machete. Juan turned pale and didn't move till she turned away. Then he scampered into the kitchen.

"My God, did you see that?” said Kathy.

"Perhaps he'll tend to his business now,” Jim answered calmly.

But he was wrong about that. At least, Juan found time to return to their table to drop a word when he served them coffee.

"And how was the jungle trip?” he asked with a gloating smile.

"You should know,” Jim answered. Then, to deflect comment concerning this curious remark, he quickly turned to Kathy and said, “You know, we're leaving tomorrow. Do you think a hundred and fifty pesos too little to tip the cook?”

"Are you going out of your mind, Jim?”

"In deepest appreciation for services rendered, that's the way I feel about it."

"Oh, do what you wish."

Smiling, Jim counted out the money while Juan watched, obviously shocked. “And this is for you,” said Jim, adding a mere ten-peso note as a tip for Juan who could not protest. He looked sick but managed a smile and retreated to the kitchen from which he returned some moments later to extend the cook's appreciation.

7.

Later, on the lower balcony after Kathy had gone to join the card players, Jim sat with another guest. Conversation led to the cook and her tirade against Juan.

"Nothing new about that,” said the other guest. “Last year she got to him with that machete and put him on his back for a month."

"Really?"

"A nasty old woman, but she can really cook."

"The best,” said Jim, looking at his watch. He stood up, excused himself and went to the upper balcony. Quiet there, the diners and waiters gone, a light in the kitchen, the Indian woman cleaning up. As Jim stepped into the kitchen, she turned.

"Just wanted to make sure you received the tip I sent you," said Jim. “You did get it?”

The cook nodded, smiled.

"All of it? A hundred and fifty pesos?"

"It was but ten, Senor."

"That was for Juan. He must have made a mistake,” said Jim and, with that, he turned round and left the kitchen.

Some minutes later, while standing at the front of the lobby, Juan passed him without notice and started down the dark road under the motionless palms. Almost within seconds the Indian woman followed him.
Next morning neither the cook nor Juan appeared at the breakfast hour. Then news came of the murder. Juan had been found just below the hotel in the bushes, hacked to death. The Indian woman could not be located.

The guest of last year, whom Jim had spoken to the night before, was heard to say the obvious: “I wouldn't be surprised if it was the cook. They scrapped last night, and she slammed him with that machete once before, you know. Too bad, because she could wrestle up a meal.”

Kathy had nothing to say. Not until she and Jim were aboard the plane and flying north toward Mexico City. Then she turned to Jim and said, “Wasn't it awful?”

Not looking at her, he lit a cigarette. “You mean about Juan? He had that coming, I think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jealousy, of course. The cook was soft on him, but yesterday she found he'd been going around with another woman. One of the hotel guests. Lucky the cook didn't go to work on her.”

Kathy had turned dead white. “How do you know all this?” she finally asked.

“Alfredo told me,” he replied, continuing the lie. Then he waited, for she had to ask, her woman's curiosity greater than her fear.

“Did he say who the woman was?”

Her words were weighted, barely audible. They made Jim smile, and at last he turned and looked at her. “Alfredo didn't have to,” he said slowly, watching her turn pale again. Then she raised her hand in a peculiar constricted gesture, as if to ward off a blow, and he laughed.

“You see, I knew all the while,” he went on. “And next time, if there is a next time, you'll know what to expect.”

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The girl at the mike had a husky voice that did things to the spine.

She was tall, redheaded, put together in a way that flowed tantalizingly as she swayed to the rhythm of the music.

Her black, decollete gown clung to her like a wet bathing suit.

At the bar, Johnny Liddell hung a cigarette between his lips, let it dangle there unlighted. He could hear the heavy breath of the bartender as it whistled through his teeth. The rumble of conversation that had filled the room a few minutes before had died down to a whisper, glasses stopped jingling as she did things to a torchy number.

Suddenly, the song was over, the house lights came up. There was a moment of silence as though the audience was catching its collective breath, then a roar of applause exploded.

Johnny Liddell swung around to the bar, discovered the unlighted cigarette between his lips, dropped it to the floor.

The glass in front of him was empty, he signaled to the bartender for a refill.

"Quite a number," Liddell grinned.

"That babe's all woman," the bartender wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "I watch her twice a night seven nights a week and she still does it to me." He reached to the backbar, grabbed a bottle, tilted it over a jigger. He replaced the bottle on the backbar, dumped a couple of pieces of ice into the glass, washed them down with soda.

Liddell dropped a bill on the bar. "Full house you got. She draw them like this every night?"

The bartender pursed his lips, his eyes hop scotched from table to table. "Every night. And all spenders, not a stiff in the place. All big uptown society people." He snagged the bill, headed for the cash register.

On the floor, the redhead was still taking bows. Liddell found a fresh cigarette, lit it. He took a deep drag, blew it through his nostrils in twin streams. He swung around on his barstool, squinted through the smoke, studied the faces around the dance floor. Some he knew, some he recognized from the Sunday supplements. The bartender was right when he tagged it a top-drawer crowd.

The audience finally let the redhead go. She turned, headed for the backstage entrance. The walk was a production.

The house lights went down, a yellow spot probed through the semi-darkness, picked up the M. C. as he pranced out onto the floor. He was tall and thin, had unbelievably broad shoulders and walked with a peculiar mincing step.

Even from where Liddell sat, his teeth looked too white and too even to be real. He fluttered through a couple of off-color jokes that brought a faint ripple of laughter and sang two nasal choruses of a number never destined to become popular as the result of his rendition.

The door to backstage opened and a man in a tuxedo that fitted snugly across the hips, showed signs of ample and expert padding at the shoulders circled the floor, threaded his way through the tables. He walked down the bar to where Liddell sat, stopped at his elbow.

"You're Mr. Liddell?" The voice showed the faintest trace of an accent.

"I'm Liddell." He dropped the cigarette to the floor, got down from the stool.

"Will you follow me?" The man in the tuxedo led the way back through the tables to the backstage door.

The glitter and the tinsel of the dining room had no counterpart backstage. There was a long, dingy corridor lined with doors. It smelled exotically of one part perspiration, compounded with three parts perfume.

They stopped in front of a door decorated with a peeling gilt star. The man in the tuxedo knocked. "It's Charles,
Mona.

"Come in. I'm decent."

The redhead sat on a straight-backed chair in front of a cluttered dressing table. Half a dozen snapshots and telegrams were stuck in the molding of a fly specked mirror over the table. Her thick red hair was hanging down over her shoulders, and she had changed the close fitting dress for a black silk dressing gown. Her face had been wiped clean of make-up, giving it a fresh and youthful look. Her mouth was moist and soft looking.

"Thanks, Charles," she dismissed the man in the tuxedo with a smile, waited until he had closed the door behind him.

"I'm glad you could come, Liddell. I need your help." She studied him frankly, seemed satisfied with what she saw. She reached over to the dressing table, picked up a long silver box, shook out a cigarette. She offered one to the private detective. He took one, smelled it, put it back.

"I prefer tobacco in mine." He reached into his pocket, brought out one of his own cigarettes. "You're in trouble, you say?"

The redhead leaned forward and accepted a light. "Not yet. That's what I need you for. To see that I don't have any trouble." She let the murky, sweet-smelling smoke dribble from between half-parted lips. "Anybody see you come back here?"

"Just the guy you sent for me."

"Charles? He doesn't matter." She got up from her chair, walked over to the door, opened it a crack and looked up and down the corridor. Satisfied that nobody was within hearing distance, she closed the door. "I have to talk to you, but this isn't the place to do it. Can you meet me after the last show?"

"I'd like to think it's my fatal charm, but it's business?"

The redhead nodded. "It'll be worth your while."

Liddell grinned. "I'll bet." He pulled over a chair, reversed it and straddled it, resting his elbows on the back. "Can't you give me some idea of what it's all about? Maybe I can put the next couple of hours to good use."

The redhead caught her full lower lip between her teeth, shook her head. "I want you to have the whole picture before you begin. I can't give it to you here. In this place you never know when someone might walk in—and I get nervous with an audience."

Liddell shrugged. "You sold me. Where and when do I meet you?"

"My place. About 3."

Liddell grinned at her. "It may be unchivalrous to mention it, but I don't know where your place is."

"I thought you were a detective?" she chided. "I'm in Marlboro Towers, suite 3D."

Liddell bounced the key on his palm, dropped it into his pocket. "You'll be all right until 3?"

"I am? How?"

She walked over to the dressing table with the same strut she had used on the dance floor. From the top drawer, she
took out a paper-wrapped package. “You're going to mind this for me. Nothing will happen to me while you have that package. It's sort of like an insurance policy.”

Liddell took the package, turned it over incuriously, dropped it into his side pocket.

"No questions?” She turned the full power of her green eyes on him.

"Not unless you want me to ask them."

He pushed back his chair and stood up. The redhead ran her incredibly graceful fingers through her hair, stared at him thoughtfully. “You're quite a man, Liddell. My kind of man, I think."

"What kind's your kind, Mona?"

She shrugged. “A man who knows there's a time and place for everything. Who asks questions when they should be asked—and who knows when to wait for answers."

"I'm the patient type."

She grinned at him. “Two hours isn't so long.” She went over to him, reached up on her toes, pressed her mouth against his. Her lips were as soft and moist as they looked. “That'll carry you over."

He tried to slide his hand around her waist but she slid under his arm. “I'll be expecting you at 3, Liddell.” She leaned back against the edge of the table, looked up at him from under lowered lids. “You won't be late?"

Liddell grinned crookedly. “Not even if I break two legs."  

2.

The evening breeze flapped the awnings on some of the fancier boîtes along the avenue, felt good after the closeness of the bar. Liddell checked his watch, found he had two hours to kill, decided it was a good night for walking. He was halfway up the block when a man came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't turn around fast, Liddell,” a whining voice told him. “I got a nervous finger.” The man took his position at Liddell's right, another man materialized on his left. The man on the right moved a topcoat he had folded over his right arm. The ugly snout of a .45 poked out from under its folds. “Let's walk around the corner. It's a nice night for a ride.”

His companion reached into Liddell's jacket, pulled out his gun, dropped it into his pocket. “What's it all about, friend?” Liddell looked the man over. He was thin, undersized, a fact that his carefully built-up shoulders failed to conceal. His hair was thick, black and rolled back in oily waves from his low hairline. He wore it in a three-quarter part, revealing the startling whiteness of his scalp. His thin, bloodless lips were parted in what was intended to be a smile, but there was no trace of it in the eyes that squinted across the high bridge of an enormous hooked nose.

"We're going to a party."

Liddell's eyes dropped to the .45. “You make it hard to refuse. But I'll take a rain check. I'm not dressed for a party."  

The thin lips tilted at the corners, the eyes grew bleaker. “You are for this one. It's a come-as-you-are party.”

They turned the corner, headed for a car sitting a few feet down the block without lights. The man with the gun signaled for his companion to get behind the wheel, then he and Liddell slid into the back seat.

“What'd the girl tell you, Liddell?” the hook-nosed man wanted to know. From the tone of his voice, it seemed as though he didn't care whether Liddell told him or not.

"What should she have told me?" Liddell countered.

The man with the gun ignored the question. “Who you working for on this caper? The insurance company?”
Liddell considered it, shook his head. “No one. She gave me hot flushes with that song of hers; I went back to see if I could do myself any good.” He shrugged. “From the reception I got, I guess a lot of guys get the same idea.” He settled back in the corner, managed to work the package the girl had given him out of his pocket. He could feel the perspiration beading on his forehead as he shoved it down behind the seat.

The hook-nosed man reached out, caught him by the lapel. “What are you squirming about?” His face was a white blur in the interior of the car. The snout of his gun bored into Liddell’s midsection.

"I was trying to reach a cigarette."

Hook-nose pushed him away. “Okay. But get it with two fingers. Anything but a cigarette comes out, and I blast the hand off."

Liddell brought up a cigarette, stuck it between his lips. He wiped the perspiration off his upper lip with the side of his hand. The gunman’s lips were twisted in a grin in the flickering light of the match.

"I always thought you private eyes were tough. You look real tough on television,” he chuckled. “What’re you sweating about?” He jabbed the gun into Liddell’s side, was rewarded with a grunt. “On T.V. you’d be taking this away from me. Here, I’ll be giving it to you—slug by slug."

Liddell smoked silently, watched the character of the neighborhood change from densely populated to suburban with longer and longer stretches of unpopulated areas showing up. About forty minutes from the Queensboro Bridge, the car left the paved road, found an old dirt road that headed toward the Sound.

"What's on the program?” Liddell wanted to know.

The hook-nosed man chuckled. “A swim. Only you’re not going to know about it."

The car shuddered to a stop and the driver swung around on his seat. “You better find out what he knows first, Hook. The boss is going to want to know what the girl has on her mind. If she's selling out—"

"I know, I know,” Hook growled. “You stick to your wheel. Let me take care of my end.” He jabbed the gun into Liddell’s side. “Out."

"Suppose I don't?"

"Then you get it here. Be my guest.” He pulled away from Liddell. “Don't count on us being afraid to muss up the car. It ain't ours."

Liddell nodded, pushed open the door, stepped out. When the hook-nosed man got up from his seat to follow, Liddell took a long-shot gamble. He caught the door, slammed it shut behind him. He heard the yowl of pain as it collided with the gunman’s head, started running.

The sand seemed glued to his feet, made his shoes feel like hundred-pound weights as he sprinted for a clump of trees and underbrush a hundred feet away. His heart was pounding in his chest, his breath coming in gasps as he reached it. From the car came a series of sharp snaps, and slugs whistled over his head, chewed bits out of the tree next to him. He dove down onto his face, lay there.

He could hear Hook cursing shrilly, yelling orders at the driver. Liddell lay still for a moment, then parted the bushes. Hook and the driver were approaching cautiously, guns in hand. Liddell crawled back further into the bushes, pulled himself to his feet behind a tree.

"We split up. You go around that way, I’ll go this,” Hook snarled at the driver. “He's got no gun and we got to get him."

"The boss ain't going to like it if he gets away, Hook,” the driver said.

"He ain't getting away,” Hook promised.
Liddell could hear the crashing of branches as the two men pushed their way into the wooded area. He squeezed back out of sight behind the tree, squinted against the darkness. To his left he could see the driver pushing his way toward him. He moved around the tree, waited.

Suddenly, as the driver came abreast of him, Liddell jumped. He tried to get his arm around the man's throat to cut off any warning, missed. The driver yelled his surprise and struggled. Liddell had his gun hand, twisted it behind the other man's back, pulled him in front of him as a shield.

A bush to the right seemed to belch flame. The man in Liddell's arms stiffened, jerked twice, then went limp. To the right he could hear the crashing of bushes as Hook ran for the car. Liddell let the driver's body slump to the ground, wasted precious minutes fumbling in the dark for the dead man's gun. By the time he found it, he could hear the roar of the car as its wheels spun in the sand. Suddenly, it got traction, roared back toward the road. Liddell pushed his way out of the bushes, squeezed the trigger of his gun until it was empty. In the distance he could hear the roar of the car's motor, the scream of its tires as it skidded onto the road.

He went back to where the driver lay, turned him over on his back, lit a match. One of Hook's shots had caught him in the neck. It left a little black hole above the knot in his tie that had spilled a crimson stream down his shirt.

It only took one.

Liddell consulted the watch on his wrist, groaned when he realized he had less than an hour to reach the redhead. He headed for the road, didn't see another car or a place to telephone for over an hour and a half.

When he finally did reach an all-night drugstore, there was no answer from the redhead's apartment. The girl on the switchboard at Marlboro Towers couldn't remember whether Miss Varden had come in or not. Liddell slammed the receiver back on its hook, cursed vigorously. He dropped another coin in the slot, dialed police headquarters.

3.

It was almost four o'clock when Johnny Liddell left the elevator at the third floor in Marlboro Towers, walked down to the redhead's door. He tried the knob, found it unlocked pushed the door open. A uniformed cop, standing near the window, looked at him with no sign of enthusiasm as he walked in.

"Inspector Herlehy here? I'm Johnny Liddell."

The cop pointed to a closed door. "He's expecting you."

A bed lamp was burning, throwing a pale amber light over the bed. Mona Varden lay on the pink coverlet of the bed. One arm dangled to the floor; the other was thrown across her face, as though to ward off a blow. Her throat had been cut from ear to ear, and a pool of blood had formed on the rug next to the bed.

Inspector Herlehy of Homicide stood at the far side of the bed, chomping on the ever-present wad of gum. "Your tip came too late, Liddell," he grunted. He nodded to the bed. "She was like this when the boys got here."

Liddell nodded. "No trace of who did it?"

The inspector shrugged. "The lab boys are working at it." He pulled a fresh slice of gum from his pocket, denuded it of wrapper, folded it and stuck it between his teeth. "We thought you might be able to help."

A white-coated representative of the medical examiner's office walked over, stared down at the body and shook his head. "That was a pretty nifty dish until somebody decided to make hash out of it," he said. He handed Herlehy a receipt to sign, waited until it was initialled. "Thanks, Inspector. We'll take her along if you don't need her any more."

Herlehy nodded. He walked over to a window, stared down into the street below. Liddell walked around the bed, watched grimly while two men transferred the body from the bed to a stretcher, covered it with a sheet and walked out. When the door had closed behind them, Herlehy swung around. "Okay, Liddell, suppose you start talking."
"Let's go outside." He led the way into the living room, dropped into an easy chair, fumbled for a cigarette.

"What's your connection with the redhead?" Herlehy wanted to know.

"I never spoke to her before tonight. She contacted the office about six, wanted me to meet her at the club after the twelve o'clock show."

Herlehy pushed his broad-brimmed sheriff-type hat on the back of his head. "That can all be checked."

"Pinky, my secretary, will verify." He took a deep drag on the cigarette, took it from between his lips, lifted a crumb of tobacco from the tip of his tongue. "She wanted help on something. She wouldn't talk there, asked me to meet her here."

"It doesn't make sense," Herlehy growled. "Why didn't she have you meet her before she went to the club—or even here after the show? Why drag you in to that upholstered sewer only to tell you to meet her here?"

"I don't know, she just—" He broke off, snapped his fingers. "Maybe I do at that. Maybe she just wanted to give me the package to hold. That's what it was, the package!"

Herlehy growled. "That clears everything up. What package?"

"It was about so big by so long." Liddell described it with his hands. "She said it was insurance that she'd be able to meet me."

"Where is it?"

Liddell crushed out the cigarette. "I stuck it down behind the cushions in the car they were using to take me for a ride. It's—"

"It's gone," Herlehy groaned. "They've got that car stashed away someplace, and—"

"No. It wasn't their car. They socked it just to take me for a ride. Chance is Hook dumped it as soon as he got to town."

Herlehy motioned the uniformed cop over. "Take this down and phone it right in. I want it out on the wires immediately." He turned to Liddell. "Give him the details."

Liddell scowled in concentration. "It was a dark one—black or dark blue. Looked like a 1953 Lincoln to me. Chances are it has a couple of bullet holes in the back. I emptied a gun at it." He looked at Herlehy. "You get a make from the local cops on the driver?"

Herlehy shook his head. "Not yet. We will. Now, about this guy Hook. You make him?"

"It seems to me I know him from somewhere, but I can't put my finger on it. Give me a couple of hours with the nickname file and I'll make him. I never forget a face, inspector, and in his case it's going to be double in spades."

The uniformed patrolman answered a knock at the door. A tall, carefully tailored man stood in the hallway, a grey Stetson in his hand. He looked around curiously at the sight of the uniformed cop, raised his eyebrows at the presence of the other two.

"I'm Lee Morton of the Dispatch," he told no one in particular. "I have an appointment with Mona Varden."

Herlehy tugged at his earlobe. "Lee Morton, eh? The gossip columnist?"

Morton nodded. His bright little eyes hopscotched around the room, missed nothing. "Mona Varden called me, said she'd have a real story for me tonight."

"Know what the story was about?" Herlehy wanted to know.
The columnist pursed his lips, shook his head. "She didn't like to talk over the phone. She often had good items for me and I'd pick them up here."

"Why? You were at the club tonight," Liddell told him. "I saw you there."

Morton grinned humorlessly. "I'm there almost every night. It's part of my job. But if Mona were seen talking to me, she'd be blamed for everything I printed." He looked Liddell over dispassionately. "You're Johnny Liddell, aren't you?"

Liddell nodded.

The columnist turned back to the homicide man. "I don't like to appear curious, Inspector, but perhaps it's not too much to ask what's going on? After all, it's not usual to keep a date with a night club singer to find the police force and the town's best-known private eye playing chaperone. Where's Mona?"

Liddell cocked an eye as if he were figuring. "Just about now they're loading her onto a slab at the city morgue."

The grey hat fell from Morton's fingers, rolled on the floor. He picked it up, dusted it off mechanically with the palm of his hand. "Is that on the level?" he turned to Herlehy.

The homicide man nodded.

"Who did it?" the columnist demanded.

"That's what we're trying to find out, Morton," Herlehy growled. "Right at the moment we've got it narrowed down to nine million people, but by tomorrow maybe we'll be able to eliminate some of them."


"Got something?" Herlehy wanted to know.

"I don't know, Inspector. We ran the nickname cards through, then we ran only the cards of short men. That cut it down to sixteen. From the m.o. file we ran through the known guns who use .45s and we cut it down to three. One's dead, the other's in Quentin." He tapped a card on his thumb nail. "This one doesn't sound like it."

Liddell looked up from the mug book. "Why not?"

"Never went in for killing. He's been up several times for jewel jobs and stickups. Never used the gun." He looked at the card. "Name's Lou Eastman, nickname's Hook."

Liddell swore softly, snapped his fingers. "I said he looked familiar, inspector. Our agency was on the VanDeventer jewel job about seven years ago, remember? Eastman was up for the job, wiggled free." He walked down the row of cabinets, pulled out a drawer, flipped through the pictures, stopped at one and scowled at it. "That's the guy, inspector. Hook Eastman."

Herlehy nodded to the lieutenant, got up, walked to the wall where a water cooler was mumbling softly to itself, and helped himself to a drink. He crumpled the cup in his fist, threw it at a waste basket. "Sure of that, Liddell? I remember that little rat. I wouldn't figure him for a killer. He's too yellow."

"He ran out, didn't he? It was Eastman, all right."

"Can't hurt to have a talk with him," Herlehy conceded. He walked back to the desk, punched a button on the base of the phone. "Put out an APB on Hook Eastman, suspicion of assault with a deadly weapon. Get his description from Identification." He dropped the receiver on its hook, chewed on his thumb nail for a moment. "I don't get the connection between a heist artist like Eastman and a babe like Varden with her throat cut."
"Any word on the car?"

Herlehy shook his head. "Not yet. But we'll find it if it's in town. And I can't figure a city rat like Eastman dumping the car in the sticks and making his way back. He wouldn't feel safe unless he could disappear down a sewer or into a subway."

It was almost noon before the car was recovered.

Inspector Herlehy sat sleeping in his desk chair in his office, heels hooked on the corner of his desk, window shades drawn. Johnny Liddell lay sprawled on the big leather couch. When the phone shrilled, the inspector started, dropped his legs from the desk. He lifted the receiver from its hook, held it to his ear, growled into it. After a moment, he replaced the receiver, walked stiffly to the window, opened the blinds, spilled a yellow pool of sunlight into the office. He walked over to the small sink, splashed cold water into his face, dragged a comb through his hair.

Liddell rolled over onto his back, stared around the room. His eyes finally came to focus on the inspector. "What time's it?" he yawned.

"Near noon," Herlehy grunted. He ran the tips of his finger along the stubble on his chin. "Motor Vehicle picked the car up on Canal Street about an hour ago. Identification's been going over it for fingerprints. No soap."

Liddell slid his legs off the couch, sat up. "What about the package?"

"They found it behind the cushion. It's on its way up." He walked over, sank into his desk chair, stabbed at a button on his desk. When a young patrolman stuck his head in the door, he said tiredly, "Get us a couple of coffees, will you, Ray?"

"One black," Liddell added.

The cop's head was withdrawn. The door closed.

Liddell tottered to the sink, doused his face and hair. He was drying them off on the towel when a knock came on the door and Hennessy of Motor Vehicle walked in. He grinned a hello at Liddell, dropped a familiar brown paper-wrapped package on the inspector's desk. "Right where you said it'd be, inspector."

Herlehy nodded. He picked up the package, turned it over curiously in his hand. Then he broke the string. "Let's see what all the shooting's about." The brown paper wrapper peeled away to reveal a canvas pouch loosely basted at the top. Herlehy ripped the thread with his nail, dumped the contents of the bag on his desk top.

A cascade of diamonds of all sizes flowed onto the desk. 

Liddell tossed the towel at its hook, whistled. "I'll be damned."

Herlehy stirred the pile with a blunt forefinger. "At least it makes sense. It explains where Eastman fits into the picture." He picked up one of the larger stones, held it up to the light, murmured appreciatively.

Hennessy, the man from Motor Vehicle, closed his mouth. It had been hanging open since the diamonds first poured out. "You knew this was there all the time?"

"We weren't sure what was in it," Herlehy said. He scooped the stones back into their bag. "This is the same bag Varden gave you last night?"

Liddell nodded.

Herlehy reached into his drawer, found a rubber band, closed the neck of the pouch, dropped it on his desk top. "Tie this up the same way I do, Johnny?"

"The epidemic of jewel jobs?"
Herlehy nodded. “It figures. Most of the jobs were Cafe Society. Who's in a better spot to finger the jobs? While Varden was strutting around, she could have been in a swell spot to get a slant at the worthwhile ice those rich dames were sporting. Then she signaled somebody—"

"Eastman?"

Herlehy considered it, shook his head. “No, not Eastman. It'd have to be somebody that was there every night or could go there without being conspicuous. Eastman couldn't. As an ex-con, one of the boys on the vice squad would have spotted him if he made the bright lights too often."

"I better be getting back downtown, inspector,” Hennessy put in. “Do I tell the boss about this?"

Herlehy nodded. “Tell him to keep it quiet until we get ready to break it."

The patrolman with the coffee passed Hennessy on the way in. He deposited two containers of coffee on the desk.

Herlehy flipped the canvas bag at him. “Take this down to the Property Clerk and get me a receipt on it, Ray,” he told him.

Liddell gouged the top out of his container, tasted it, burned his tongue and swore under his breath. “The lab boys didn't come up with anything in Varden's apartment?"

Herlehy shook his head. “Some guy who couldn't sleep saw a man knocking at her door, but it was only Morton, the newspaper guy. We knew about that. Outside of that, a dry well.” He stirred his coffee with his finger. “If we could find Eastman and shake out of him who it was that gave him the orders to pick you up—"

"Why don't we work backwards? Who knew I was in to see Varden? Just the headwaiter, the guy she called Charles. He must have tipped Eastman."

Herlehy looked thoughtful. “A headwaiter, eh? He could fit the picture. He's in the club every night. He could be the one Varden signalled to. He—” The inspector scowled, shook his head. “It don't wash. Look, suppose Varden was fingering for a jewel mob. She decides to doublecross them and hold out a batch of stones for herself. Does it make sense that she'd let the head man know who she was giving them to for safekeeping?"

Liddell pinched his nostrils between thumb and forefinger. “Unless Charles got together with Eastman and decided to doublecross the big shot. Then he could have pulled a triple cross by telling the big shot that Mona was getting ready to pull out."

Herlehy took a swallow of coffee, grunted. “The only way we'll know for sure is to ask them.” He drained the container, tossed it at a waste basket. “I've got a call out for both of them. We'll get them—and when we do we'll get a few answers to a few questions."

Johnny Liddell lived in the Hotel Abbott, an old, weather-beaten, grime-darkened stone building that nestled anonymously in a row of similar stone buildings on East 31st Street. The lobby was large, noisy, seemed bathed in a perpetual pink light, the reflection of the huge neon sign to the right of the entrance that identified The Cowl Room—Cocktails. The easy chairs spaced throughout the lobby were filled with men who perused their newspapers with a determination undampened by the noise around them.

A short fat man at the cigar counter was trying, with indifferent success, to interest the blonde who presided over it in his plans for the evening. She looked over his shoulder, waved at Liddell as he came in.

Liddell winked back and headed for the bank of elevators in the rear, but was deterred by a gesture from the immaculate creature behind the registration desk.

"A message for you, sir,” he said importantly. He made a production of removing an envelope from a pigeonhole prominently numbered 625. He handed it across the desk, worked hard at a semblance of an urbane smile that missed by miles. “Your friends were disappointed that they missed you.” He stood adjusting his cuffs.
Liddell turned the envelope over. It bore the return address of the Hotel Abbott, had “Johnny Liddell” scrawled across the front. He looked up into the clerk's eyes.

"They wanted to leave a message, so I suggested they use our facilities." He dry-washed his hands, bobbed his head.

Liddell slit open the envelope, pulled out a folded sheet of note paper. It was blank on both sides. He growled under his breath, swung the register around, satisfied himself that no new arrivals occupied adjoining rooms or rooms across the hall.

"What'd these friends of mine look like?" Liddell demanded.

"I only saw one. He had a slight accent, and—"

Liddell growled, started away from the desk toward the elevator.

"I hope nothing's wrong, Mr. Liddell," the clerk called after him.

"I hope you get your hope."

The dry-wash was going full speed. "Of course, I didn't give out your room number. I never—"

Liddell stopped, grinned mirthlessly at him. “You didn't give out my room number. You just stick an empty envelope into my box.” He turned his back, entered the grillwork elevator cage.

At the sixth floor, he looked both ways, satisfied himself there was no stakeout in the corridor. He walked down to his room, put his ear against the door. There was no sound.

The keyhole showed no signs of being tampered with, but he didn't have to be a locksmith to realize that the lock couldn't put up a respectable struggle with a bent bobby pin. He slid his key in the lock, turned it. He pushed the door open, flattened himself against the wall, waited for some indication that one of his “friends” was inside.

Finally, he applied one eye to the edge of the door.

Charles, the headwaiter at Mona Varden's club sat in Liddell’s favorite easy chair facing the door. A fixed smile was frozen on his lips, his eyes stared at Liddell unblinkingly. His throat had been cut expertly from ear to ear.

Liddell walked in, closed the door behind him. The room gave every evidence of a careful search. Drawers were pulled out, their contents spilled on the floor, the pillows on the couch and in the chairs had been slashed.

He walked over to where the dead man sat, stared at him for a moment. Then he picked up the telephone, dialed police headquarters. He was connected with Inspector Herlehy.

"You can stop looking for Charles, Inspector. I've got him here at my hotel."

"Good,” the inspector's voice approved. “Keep him there. I've got some questions to ask that baby."

Liddell nodded, looked over to where Charles sat. “He's not likely to be going any place. If he tries turning his head it'll fall off.”

The receiver was silent for a moment. “Dead?”

"Real dead."

Herlehy growled at him. “I'll have a squad up there right away.” He slammed the receiver down.

6.

Late that afternoon, Johnny Liddell sat at his desk in his 42nd Street office, stared out across Bryant Park. He swung around at the sound of the inner office door opening, grinned at his redheaded secretary as she came in with a pile of
correspondence for signing.

"Better sign these while you can still write," she told him. "Some of it's a week old." She dropped the letters on his desk, helped herself to a cigarette. "See tonight's paper? Lee Morton, the columnist, really gave you a working over. Said something about the best way to get rid of a client is to let them get murdered. He was wondering what, kind of business you'd be going into next."

Liddell grunted, picked up a pen, started signing the letters. "He thinks we're holding out on him." He waded through the pile, pushed them away. "He's a prima donna anyway."

Pinky pursed her lips. "Maybe so. But a guy like that could be real helpful, seems to me. In that job of his he knows all the characters at the club. Don't forget he hangs around there almost every night."

Liddell shrugged. "He's still a prima donna."

The redhead picked up the letters, checked through them. "My feminine intuition tells me you have something more up your sleeve than a hairy arm." Her eyes rolled up from the letters to his face. "You wouldn't look good with your throat cut."

He started to answer, broke off at a sharp knock on the office door. He held his finger to his lips, pulled open the top drawer, brought out a .45. He walked across to the door to the outer office, reached for the knob.

He was almost thrown off balance by the force with which the door was pushed open. A girl ran in, slammed the door behind her, leaned against it.

She was young, blonde. There was no color in her face, her make-up stood out as garish patches against the color. She wore a well-filled Nile-green sweater and skirt. She looked from Liddell to the redhead and back, reached up, tucked a loose tendril of hair into place with incredibly long, graceful fingers.

She made a desperate attempt to gain control of herself, almost made it. "I've got to see you, Mr. Liddell." She was breathing heavily.

Liddell looked her over, nodded toward the customer's chair. He walked into the outer officer, opened the hall door, satisfied himself the corridor was empty. He stuck the .45 into his waistband, walked back into the private office.

"Do I know you?"

The blonde shook her head. "I was Charles' sweetheart. I worked as hat check girl at the club."

Liddell hoisted one hip on the corner of the desk, nodded for her to go on.

She licked at her lips. "It's true? Charles is dead?"

"He's dead all right. Know who did it?"

She shook her head. "All I know is it's just like Mona. They'll be after me next." She fitted a cigarette to the wet red blob of her mouth with a shaking hand. "They're probably after me right now."

Liddell steadied the cigarette, held a light, waited until she had filled her lungs. "Who're they?"

"I don't know."

Liddell stared at her for a moment, walked around behind his desk. "Let's start at the beginning. You were Charles' girl. What's your name?"

"Bea. Bea Clarke." She pulled the cigarette from between her lips, crushed it out. "Don't let them do it to me, Mr. Liddell. Don't let them."

Liddell nodded. "You were in on the jewel jobs?"
The girl licked her lips, nodded.

"Who was the top man in the set-up, Bea?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. God help me, I don't know. Only Mona knew."

"How about Charles?"

"Only Mona."

Liddell drummed on the corner of his desk with the tips of his fingers. "Did you know Eastman? Hook Eastman?"

The girl buried her face in her hands, started to sob. She nodded. "He was part of the set-up. He did the actual stick-up." She raised her tear-stained face. "The head man signaled to Mona which ones were to be taken—"

Pinky brought two glasses and a pint of bourbon in, poured a drink for the girl.

"That figures," Liddell conceded. "Mona couldn't have spotted the real stuff from the floor. We had it backwards."

He wrinkled his brows. "Then the big shot was out front quite a bit. Go on. Then what?"

"Mona would get word to me which ones were to be taken. Charles would take over the checkroom and I'd go out for air. I'd be on the curb when the mark came out. Eastman would be down the street waiting for the signal."

Liddell poured himself a drink. "Suppose there were several women in the party. How would he know which one to take?"

The girl took a deep swallow from her cup, coughed. "I'd fix the left side of my hat. That would mean the woman on the left. If I fixed the right side, it meant the one on my right."

"What happened last night? How come Charles went to my place?"

The blonde licked her lips. "Charles got a call from the boss. He had just left Mona's place and she didn't have any jewels on her. Eastman had just delivered a big batch to her before the midnight show. Charles told him about you being in Mona's dressing room. He figured you'd left them at your place. They went over there—" She dabbed at her eyes. "That's the last I saw of Charles."

"You didn't see who he went with?"

Bea shook her head. "He was going to meet him in front of your hotel. He instructed Charles to come alone."

Liddell got up, paced the room. After a moment he stopped alongside Bea's chair. "You'd better stay under cover for a few days." He looked up to Pinky. "Can you put her up until I wrap this up, Pink?"

"Sure," Pinky nodded. "But what are you going to be doing in the meantime?"

"First, I'm going to patch up my relations with the press. I think Lee Morton might be more willing to cooperate if I fed him a couple of exclusives."

"Such as?"

Liddell winked at her. "Such as the name of the killer and the head of the jewel ring." He caught Bea by the arm, lifted her out of the chair. "You take Bea along to your place, Pink. I'll be in touch."

When the hall door had closed behind the two girls, Liddell picked up his phone, dialed the Dispatch.

"Let me talk to Lee Morton," he told the metallic voiced operator. In a moment, he heard the columnist's voice. "Morton? This is Johnny Liddell."

"What's on your mind? A beef about today's column?" He didn't sound as though he cared one way or the other.
"I've got a thick skin," Liddell assured him cheerfully. "But there's no reason why we can't be friends. We might help each other."

"How do you figure to help me?" the receiver demanded.

"I might have a nice juicy story for you. Exclusive."

There was no change in the expression in the columnist's voice. "And when might this change of operation take place?"

Liddell grinned. "You're a suspicious sort of guy. Just to prove my good faith, I'll give you one to start off. Bea Clarke, the sweetie of the headwaiter that was killed in my apartment, is giving herself up to the police tonight at 10."

The columnist's voice was cautious. "So?"

"She'll spill the whole set-up on the jewel jobs. How they were fingered, who did the heist, everything."

Morton sounded more interested. "Now you're beginning to perk. No one else in on it?"

"No one else. You get it exclusive. We can even arrange for her to turn herself into you."

"You got a deal, Liddell." There was a change in Morton's voice. "I'll make it up to you. What's the other scoop?"

"I know where to lay my hands on positive proof of who killed Mona Varden. I'm willing to turn him over to you, too. Bea spilled it without knowing how important it was—"

The columnist's voice cracked with impatience. "What is it?"

"I'll do better than tell you. I'll show it to you. It's in Mona's flat. I'm on my way. Want to come?"

"Don't move. I'll pick you up at your office."

7.

Lee Morton drove a Caddy, a '54 convertible, with all the skill of an expert. He wove the big car through the heavy East Side traffic and pulled up at the Marlboro Towers exactly twelve minutes after leaving Liddell's office.

Liddell led the way to the elevator, got off at Mona Varden's floor. He looked up and down the hallway, opened the door with a key he took from his jacket pocket. The door opened noiselessly. He motioned the columnist in and closed the door after them.

Liddell produced a flashlight, ran it around the room, came to the bedroom door. He motioned for the columnist to follow him and led the way into the room where the body had been found. He seemed sure of himself, walked directly to the head of the bed, played the flashlight over the ornamental frieze, bent down to examine it more closely.

"You see, in order to see whether or not anyone on that bed was dead, you'd have to lean over. What's the most natural thing? You hold onto the frieze to keep your balance? Right?"

Morton considered it, nodded. "It sounds all right."

"Check. Okay, now our killer probably thought he was being very smart and wiped off all prints." He flicked the light at the frieze. "But the chances are a hundred to one, he never remembered sticking his fingers into that frieze. His prints there will hang him."

"The police know about this?"

Liddell shook his head. "Not yet. I just wanted to look it over before I called Herlehy. Now I'm convinced the killer's
prints are in that frieze."

He led the way to the living room. "You hold down the fort. I'll get Bea Clarke and the inspector."

"Why the girl?"

Liddell shrugged. "I have a hunch she was here and found the body. Her prints may be in there. Mine are from leaning over the body. We'll want to eliminate those."

Morton nodded. "You'll be back before Herlehy gets here?"

Liddell considered. "I don't know. I'd better leave him a note of where to have the lab boys check for the prints. Got a pencil?"

He took the copy pencil the newspaperman handed him, picked up the flashlight. "I'll just get an idea of about where to start looking. Then there'll be no delay and you can make your deadline."

He disappeared into the bedroom was back in a few minutes with a folded sheet of paper. "Give that to Herlehy when he gets here."

8.

Twenty-five minutes later, Lee Morton opened the door for Inspector Herlehy and his lab crew.

"Where's Liddell?" Herlehy growled. "I got a hurry-up call to come up here and catch a killer. This better not be one of his harebrained stunts."

Morton shrugged, held out a folded piece of paper. "He left this for you if you got here before he did."

Herlehy opened the note, read it with a puzzled frown. "Have lab boys check upper right quarter of bed headboard for prints of killer." He looked to the plainclothesmen with a scowl. "How about it, Ed? Your boys check that part of the bed?"

The shorter of the two detectives shrugged. "I guess so. But it won't do any harm to re-check. Why that particular spot?"

Morton snorted. "Liddell has some goofy idea the killer steadied himself with his hand when he leaned over Mona's body."

The plainclothesman considered it, shrugged. "We'll see what we can get off it." He led the way into the bedroom.

Herlehy tugged off his hat, tossed it on the table. "How long'd Liddell say he'd be?"

The newspaperman shrugged. "He didn't say. He said he was going to pick up Bea Clarke, the headwaiter's sweetie. She's turning herself in tonight." he consulted his watch. "In time for my first edition, I hope."

The inspector found a fresh stick of gum, denuded it. "You'll have plenty of news tonight. We picked up Hook Eastman, the gun on the jewel heists. Between him and the girl we should be able to start filling in."

Liddell opened the door with his key, stepped in. He grinned at the inspector. "Glad you got here."

"Where's the girl?" Herlehy demanded.

"She beat me to the punch. She gave herself up an hour ago. Afraid she'd get the same medicine as Charles."

Lee Morton jumped to his feet. "Then every reporter in town'll have it. You promised me an exclusive, Liddell."

"Hold your horses, Morton. I've got a better one for you. I told you I'd turn over the killer and I will." He turned to the inspector. "The boys finished in there?"
"Never mind the boys," Herlehy growled. "How do you plan to hand us the killer. You know who he is?"

Liddell nodded. "He'll identify himself."

The columnist walked over to where Liddell stood. "You can make a fool of the Police Department, Liddell, but I'm not standing still for it. I don't know what you're trying to pull, but you won't get away with it." He tried to push Liddell out of his way. "When I'm through—"

"You're through right now, Buster," Liddell grinned at him grimly. He pushed the columnist back into the room. "That injured innocence act is pretty stale. There's your killer, Inspector."

Herlehy stared from the private eye to the columnist and back. "You nuts? Why should he kill Varden?"

"She was running out on him. She had a shipment of jewels she was supposed to turn over to him, but that was going to be the price of her silence. He killed Charles because he had to reveal his identity to him to find out what Varden did with the jewels. Morton's your Mr. Big, Inspector."

The columnist swung on the Inspector. "Either you get that lunatic out of my way, Herlehy, or I'll hold you just as responsible for this as he is."

The door to the bedroom opened. One of the lab men was about to say something, Liddell cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"You know you're going to have to prove all this, Johnny," Herlehy told him.

"You're damn right he does, Herlehy. You can still get out from under," Morton raged.

"Get me a damp rag, one of you guys," Liddell called over to the plainclothesmen. They looked to the inspector, drew a nod. One of them disappeared into the bathroom, tossed a wet towel to Liddell.

"You see, inspector, I knew I'd have to make the killer expose himself, so I set a trap. I told him the killer had left his prints in the ornamental frieze on top of Mona's bed. No killer could resist the temptation to wipe those prints out. While I was gone, he wiped that grillwork clean."

"Try and prove it," the columnist snarled, "try and prove it."

"Okay, pal." Liddell walked over to where the newspaperman stood, wiped the wet towel across his right hand. The hand turned deep purple.

The inspector stared for a moment. "What's that prove?" he roared.

"Tell the inspector what you found in the frieze, boys."

The shorter of the plainclothesmen nodded. "No prints, but the cut out work was filled with the grating of an indelible pencil. Anyone who tried to wipe away any prints would get the dust all over his fingers." He looked at Morton. "The minute you wet those fingers, they turn purple."

The newspaperman swore, rushed at Liddell, threw a punch at his face. His second blow never landed. Liddell caught him flush on the jaw, drove him backward. He was on top of him with an uppercut to the midsection. A hard overhand spun the columnist around, slammed him against the table. Liddell caught him by the shoulder, turned him around and hit him flush with another right hand that knocked him clear over the table. He landed on the other side in a heap, didn't move.

"Don't rough him up," Herlehy growled. "We have special facilities for that downtown. And you better fill me in before he comes to."

"Well, we were both agreed that the killer was the head man of the jewel ring. He had to be someone who could show up in the club every night. Right?"
Herlehy nodded for him to continue.

"As you said, your night club squad would have noticed anyone who showed up every night. But nobody would notice a columnist—it's part of his job to be there."

Herlehy considered it, nodded. "Pretty neat. But why Morton? Why not half a dozen other newspapermen?"

"The way he lived. It's common gossip that the Dispatch pays off in glory instead of dollars. Yet, Morton wore the best clothes, drove the most expensive cars. Only a guy with a piece of a juicy racket can live like that."

Herlehy rubbed the side of his jaw with the tips of his fingers. "Why all the killing?"

"Mona figured on getting out and using the jewels to take care of herself. Morton didn't know she'd given me the jewels until after he'd killed her and found they weren't at her place. He called Charles to search my place. Then he realized he had placed himself in Charles' power, so he killed him. Murder is like getting olives out of a bottle. After the first one, they come easy."

Herlehy held up his hand, cut him off. "Why did he come back to the apartment that night? We wouldn't even have known he knew Varden."

Liddell grinned. "One of his master touches. Remember your boys turned up a witness who described Morton as knocking on Varden's door. We took for granted it was the time he met us there. That's what he wanted us to think. Actually, it was the first time he was there—the time he killed Mona."

Herlehy looked down to where the columnist was moaning his way back to consciousness. He nodded for one of his men to put the cuffs on Morton.

Liddell grinned. "Buying it?"

The inspector nodded. "It was a long shot, but it paid off. Between checking his accounts and what Eastman can tell us we'll make it stick."

Liddell wiped the perspiration off his forehead with his sleeve. "Where can a man get a drink around here? And how soon?"

Herlehy winked at one of his plainclothesmen. "Take Morton in and book him. I'm going to buy Liddell a drink."

Liddell stared at him. "A policeman buying a drink? That's the second most immoral thing I've heard all day."

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NECKTIE PARTY by ROBERT TURNER

There was a quiet, restrained atmosphere about the place that you could feel the moment you walked into it. It looked pretty much like any other Times Square side street cocktail lounge and restaurant. There was the bar and leather-cushioned booths and a dining room in the back. The lighting was subdued without being gloomy. But there was this feel, this air about the place that somehow seemed inviolable, so that cruising drunks, going from bar to bar to look for conversation or excitement or a pickup, walked in here and sensed the atmosphere and turned around and walked right out again. Or perhaps had one drink and used the Men's Room and then left.

The owner prided himself that in twenty years in the business there’d never been any violence in his place. Some close calls, but never any real action. This was because of the owner's infallible judgment of character. He knew the kind of people he wanted as customers almost on first sight and everything was done to encourage them; extra service, drinks on the house, credit, check-cashing, almost unctuous hospitality. The owner also knew the kind he didn't want. Everything politely possible was done to discourage them. His was a place for gentlemen and ladies, a place to drink, even to get quietly and genteelly drunk if you cared, to have a good meal after a few drinks and to relax.

He was a short, stocky, shinningly bald man, the owner, with a round, seriously intelligent face. He spoke precise English and was unusually well read and was an almost preciously agile conversationalist. With the favored customers, that is. With the others he was gentle but firm. That was the secret of running his kind of a place. When he listened to the other owners discuss the various troubles they had in their places and what to do about them, he couldn't help smiling a little smugly.

It was so easy. If you had any perceptiveness at all, you could spot by a customer's reactions when he first came in, while he was taking his first drink, by every little action and reaction, whether or not he had already taken too much, if he was hostile, inclined to boisterousness. You studied these things and it became very easy. The owner had trained his bartenders and waiters to do likewise, although, of course, they were never as good at it as he was because it didn't matter as much to them.

The bartender, this night, was new. He was a relief man the union had sent up when the regular night man called in sick. The owner watched him work, from his place by the cash register at the end of the bar, and was quite pleased. The bartender was medium height, clean cut but not so handsome that the men customers would resent him or the women start trouble by flirting with him. He had the right combination of friendliness and reserve and he knew his job. He seemed to be a smart, a good man. The owner was quite pleased.

The real test came, though, when, toward the end of the dinner hour, the door burst open and a man in an old Army field jacket came in. He was clean-shaven but he somehow looked rumpled and dirty. His hair was long and it stuck up in sprouts all over his head as though he'd just got out of bed. It was medium brown hair, except for a perfectly square patch of white on one side. He had a thin, ferret-like face, with a lot of blackheads in it. His eyes were kind of strange; not staring, exactly, but too intense, sort of fixed in their gaze and on nothing in particular. He took a seat at the bar between two groups of regular customers. The conversation at the bar, which had been rather spirited in a controlled sort of way, died down when this man sat at the bar. Everybody watched the drumming of his fingers. He didn't look at anybody. He looked down at the bar.

The owner smiled a little. It would be interesting to see how the bartender handled this one. It was obvious that he was not their kind of customer. He wondered how long it would take the bartender to get rid of him.

The bartender stopped in front of the man in the field jacket and said: “Yes, sir?”

The customer, without looking up from the bar, said, a little thickly: “Bar whiskey and water.” He pulled a crumpled dollar bill from his pocket and wadded it onto the bar.

The drink was poured and the customer took it straight, washing it down with the water. He looked up, then, toward the bartender, but the bartender had walked away to the other end of the bar and was talking there with a regular customer. The man in the field jacket kept staring at him and drumming his fingers on the bar. Twice the bartender
turned and saw the customer staring at him but politely, smilingly ignored him, even though it was obvious that the man wanted another drink. The owner smiled. The bartender was doing fine.

The first few seconds that the customer banged his glass on the bar for attention, the bartender continued to ignore him. Then he turned slowly and walked toward him. With his eyebrows arched disapprovingly, the bartender said softly: “You don't have to do that. You're disturbing the other customers."

"Oh, I am?" The customer's voice was too loud. There was a strange tightness, an almost clenched sound to it. His fixed gaze now centered straight onto the bartender's eyes. “You've been ignoring me. What the hell am I, a bum or something, I can't get served? This is a high class garam place or something?"

The bartender pursed his lips. “Please, sir! I'm afraid I can't serve you any more. You've had enough."

"Enough?" The customer said. “What do you mean, enough? I'm not drunk. You pour me another drink. You hear me?"

The owner frowned. He couldn't have this. This loud fellow was disturbing his regular people. He watched the bartender and the raucous customer while their eyes locked for a moment and he saw something he didn't understand. The bartender flinched as though he'd been struck. He seemed to go pale. Too abruptly, he turned away from the customer and, with an agitated quickness, walked toward the owner at the end of the bar.

He glanced back nervously and saw the customer still sitting there, drumming his fingers on the bar and staring fixedly into the backbar mirror. The bartender said: “What do you want me to do? If you ask me, I think we'd better give him another one, pacify—"

The whole bar was silent now. All the regular customers were pointedly avoiding the man in the Army field jacket. The silence was almost chilling. The owner said:

"Don't be absurd. Give in to him and you'll have him sitting here the rest of the night, maybe getting more pugnacious after another drink. Don't do anything. Just let him sit there. He'll get bored. Ignore him. He'll leave after awhile. I've been through this thousands of times. If he doesn't, I'll talk to him and get rid of him."

The bartender licked his lips. He was sweating a little over the bridge of his nose. He said: “This man isn't any ordinary drunk, sir. I don't think we ought to fool with him, antagonize him."

"What do you mean?" The owner was nettled at his judgement being questioned.

"There's something wrong with him. He's ready to flip. Believe me. I know this kind. I worked at a State Hospital for a year and a half. I've seen lots of 'em like that and I'm tellin' you, this one is just about to go."

The owner raised on tiptoe and looked over the bartender's shoulder. The customer was just sitting there, drumming his fingers and looking down at them.

"I think you're being melodramatic," the owner said. “But even if you're not, all the more reason to get rid of him."

Abruptly, the bartender said: “Excuse me. I've got to go to the john." He pushed past the owner.

Up at the middle of the bar, the customer started banging his empty glass on the bar. The owner sighed. He walked up there, his round, intelligent face quietly composed. He put his hands flat on the bar in front of the customer, who didn't look up but stopped banging his glass.

"Sir," the owner said, very softly. “We appreciate your patronage and we'd love to have you come back some other time but right now we feel you've had your share. You look like a nice intelligent fellow. Surely you can understand my position. We're just not allowed by law to serve anyone who has passed a certain point. Please be a nice chap and go home now and come back and see us some other time."

The customer looked up at the owner. His dirty gray eyes fastened on the owner's and the owner saw what the bartender had meant, but that odd glassiness, he knew, was because this man had taken too much to drink. He was
really plastered, even though he could still sit and probably walk straight. It wasn't an unfamiliar type of drunkenness.

A rather vacant smile formed on the customer's peaked face, showing small, crooked, carious teeth. “Is that the way it is?”

The owner smiled back, nodding. He told himself this was the way to do it. Gentle but firm. It always worked. He wished the bartender was here to watch him in action. He felt the admiring glances of his regular people and could almost feel the easing up of tension in the place.

"Or is it just that you don't like my looks?" The customer said. One hand, small, thin-fingered and dirty, gestured toward himself. The other one clenched the water glass so hard his knuckles showed white and the owner feared for a moment he might break the glass.

"Don't be absurd, sir," the owner said, gently and firmly. “A customer is a customer to us. And there's nothing wrong with the way you look."

"I see," the customer said. His hand loosened from around the glass. "In that case, I believe I'll have something to eat. There's no law against serving me food, is there? Let me see a menu." He still spoke thickly but it wasn't the usual drunken kind of thickness, the owner observed. It was more as though his tongue was suddenly too big for his mouth.

The owner thought fast. He had to settle this once and for all. He had to get rid of this fellow, this drunken or crazy or whatever-he-was bum. The drinking question was apparently over. But he couldn't have this one in his clean, quiet dining room, to disgust his regular dinner clientele. This wasn't any one-arm joint.

"I'm sorry, sir," the owner said. “We have a strict rule that gentlemen must wear a tie to be seated at a table here. A very strict rule. We couldn't possibly make an exception."

The customer looked startled. He put his hand to the neck of the dirty T-shirt he wore under the field jacket. He looked along the bar and then craned to look back in the dining room. The owner smiled. He had checked and made sure that everyone in the place was wearing a tie before he spoke. The customer's eyes came back to his. They looked full of laughter, an almost childish, secret laughter.

"God damn," he said. “Have to have a tie to eat here, huh? I'm too drunk to be served liquor and I can't eat because I got no tie."

The owner shrugged his soft shoulders. “I'm sorry, sir. That's the way it is. You understand, of course.” He moved away, indicating that the conversation was obviously over. The man would leave now. The owner glanced in the backbar mirror and saw the customer, shaking his head, dazedly, slide off the stool and stand up. The owner told himself that it was so easy if you knew how. There was no need to have any trouble with the bums, the misfits, the lowlifes. You were just firm but gentle and that was it. Who was the owner of the place, anyhow? Who decided these things? In quietness and gentleness, there was strength.

The owner decided that the bartender wasn't such a good man after all. There was no reason why he couldn't have handled the same thing in the same way. He could have if he hadn't let the man frighten him. You couldn't let these people frighten you, bluff you.

Abruptly, the owner realized that the customer in the field jacket hadn't left yet. He was standing behind the stool he'd vacated. He was looking at another man, a fat, prosperous-looking man with flowing white hair and horn-rimmed glasses, who had just entered and sat down at one of the booths. The fat man, who was one of the owner's regular people, had been for years, was looking at the menu and giving his order to the waiter who had instantly glided up to the booth.

The customer stood there, slight, medium height, hunching his narrow shoulders continually under the field jacket, both hands thrust into his pockets, and kept looking at the fat man. He watched the waiter take the fat man's order and move away. The owner wondered what was bothering the customer now, what was keeping him from leaving. And then he saw.
The prosperous-looking fat man was wearing an expensive sport jacket and slacks and a sport shirt but no tie. He suddenly became aware of the customer in the field jacket staring at him. He glowered back at him, indignantly, reddening around his puffy jowls a little.

The customer walked over to the fat man. He pointed at him and turned to the owner. “Where's his tie?” he demanded. His voice was raggedly shrill now. It stopped every other sound in the place.

He turned back to the fat man and moved right up next to the booth. He said in the same keening voice, right into the fat man's now apoplectic face: “You've got to wear a tie to eat here, mister. They told me that. I can't eat here without no tie. You can't, either. A bare neck like you and I got ain't no good, you understand?” His voice rose until it hurt the eardrums. He mimicked the owner: “I'm sure you understand.”

He drew a sobbing breath. “You got to have something around your neck. They said so. You got to.” He giggled. “I'll give you something. I'll give you a necktie.”

He pulled one hand from his pocket and it held a straight razor. He flicked it open. He reached down and caught the fat man's long white hair in his other hand and yanked his head back. “A Goddamn necktie you got to have to eat here.” He slashed the razor across the fleshy folds of the fat man's throat. The fat man's big head looked as though it was going to fall off his shoulders but it didn't. The blood came out of him like a red waterfall and went all over the table and as he staggered up out of the booth and before he fell it went across the floor, halfway to the bar.

The customer with the razor jumped back out of the way of the blood. He wheeled as the screams of people at the bar shook the place, as they turned over bar stools, lurched, bleating, toward the door. He grabbed a woman and swiped the long straight blade across her bare arm as she raised it to protect her face. Her wrist and hand hung loosely for a moment from the rest of her arm before she fainted.

The owner stood staring in stupefaction at the customer. He told himself that this couldn't be. This didn't happen in his place. And then he saw the customer coming toward him with the razor uplifted. The owner wanted to move, to run. He couldn't. He wanted to raise his arms to protect himself but they were too heavy. They wouldn't move. He watched the customer, rabid-eyed, his face twisted grotesquely, rushing toward him and knew that he was going to die but couldn't seem to understand it. Absurdly, he found himself wondering what had gone wrong, how could this have happened.

Then he saw the bartender pick up a bar stool and run up behind the customer and bring the stool down onto the back of his head. The customer's knees went out from under him but instead of falling, he half turned around. He saw the bartender with the stool raised and arcing toward him again. The customer said: “I got to have a necktie, too.” He stroked the glistening red blade across his own throat and looked down, smiling hideously at all the new blood before the stool hit him the second time and he went down.

The owner stood there for a long time, looking around, while the customers who hadn't reached the door before it was all over, tried to help the others who had fainted or gotten knocked down. Nobody was doing anything about the woman with the severed arm.

"Get a mop!” the owner screamed at the bartender. “Don't just stand here.” He made a deep sucking breath. He said: “My place! My God, my place, look at my poor place!”

He leaned his elbows on the bar by the cash register and put his face into his hands and firmly but gently began to cry.

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THE PURPLE COLLAR by JONATHAN CRAIG

There'd been a stab-and-assault in the Eighteenth's bailiwick the night before, and all leaves and days off had been cancelled until we caught the guy. My partner, Ben Muller, and I had been scheduled for relief at eight A.M., but at a quarter past four that afternoon we were still checking out leads. It's all in the day's work, of course, but there are some crimes you just naturally take more interest in than others; and when the stab-and-assault victim happens to be only nine years old, you don't mind the extra hours and loss of sleep at all.

But at a quarter past four, Control gave the signals and coding that meant the killer had been apprehended, and that all off-duty detective teams should report back to their precincts.

Ben, who was driving our RMP car, sighed and turned onto Broadway, heading back uptown to the Eighteenth.

"I'd a little rather we'd grabbed the guy ourselves," he said. "But now that he's nailed, I got no thoughts but bed. A cold shower, and then ten straight hours of sack-time."

I felt pretty much the same way, and started to say so, when the dash speaker rattled and Control broke in again. This time the lady dispatcher's voice sounded a little sorry for us. The gist of the call was that a suicide had been phoned in from an apartment house at 905 West Fifty-third Street. The assistant M.E. and the tech crew were already there, but the detective team which would normally have handled the squeal was the same team which had just trapped the killer on a roof top. That meant they'd be tied up with him for many hours, and it was up to Ben and me to fill in for them.

Ben touched the siren just enough to get us through the next intersection and fed the RMP a little more gas.

"You and I made a mistake when we signed up with this outfit, Pete," he said. "We should have taken the examination for fireman, like sensible men."

I grinned. "Sometimes I think you're right," I said.

He turned west on Fifty-third. "The job keeps you young, though," he said. "I will say that for it."

"Maybe it's just that cops don't live so long," I said. "You ever think of it that way?"

"All the time, Pete. That's another reason I wish I'd taken the exam for fireman."

"You're too fat for a fireman. You'd never get up the ladder."

"Who's worried about ladders? I'd stand around and give orders, and let skinny guys like you fool with the ladders."

"Sure," I said. "Pull up, Ben. That's nine-oh-five, there on the corner."

2.

It was a converted brownstone, like a lot of others in the neighborhood. All New York brownstones look pretty much the same from the outside, but inside, they range all the way from Bohemian pigpens to millionaires' showplaces.

This was one of the pigpens.

The dead man was in the basement apartment, suspended from a water pipe near the ceiling by a double thickness of dirty cotton clothesline. The apartment itself was something to see. There were two filthy mattresses side by side in one corner, newspapers spread on the cement floor in lieu of a carpet, an exposed toilet and sink in one corner, with an overflowing garbage pail between them, and pornographic drawings on the grimy stucco walls. There were scraps of food and cigarette butts everywhere, and a large cardboard box near the door seemed to be completely filled with empty liquor bottles and beer cans. It was a tossup as to whether the place looked worse than it smelled,
The tech crew was going about its business with even greater speed than usual, and the expressions on the men's faces showed that the sooner they finished the better they'd like it.

Bill Marcy, the beat cop who'd been waiting for us at the street door, nodded toward a woman who stood leaning up against the far wall.

"Her name's Janice Pedrick," Bill said. "She goes with this dump."

"She the one who called you?" Ben asked.

"Yeah."

The woman was smoking a cigarette, watching us sullenly. She was very tall, close to six feet, I'd say and somewhere between thirty and thirty-five. She had short blonde hair, dark at the roots, and while she wasn't especially pretty, her figure made up for it.

"Who found him, Bill?" I asked.

"She did."

The woman dropped her cigarette to the floor, left it smoldering there, and turned to watch the photographer adjust his camera for another shot.

Les Wilbur, the assistant M.E., nodded to Ben and me and motioned us over to the man hanging from the water pipe.

"I remembered the blasting you boys gave me last time I cut down a DOA, Pete," he said wryly. "This time, I left the guy hanging for you."

I nodded. "It's usually best, Les." I stepped close to the corpse. His feet cleared the floor by only a few inches, but I could still look down slightly when I looked at his face. He had been in his early forties, I guessed, a very small man who couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and ten or fifteen pounds. His sport shirt and slacks were expensive-looking, and his shoes obviously had been made by hand. His nose was badly flattened and there was a heavy tracery of scar tissue around both eyebrows.

"A fighter," Ben said. "Most likely a pro. You sure as hell'd have a hard time getting that marked up, just mixing it in back alleys."

I glanced at the doctor. "How long would you say he's been strung up here, Les?"

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Call it six to eight hours."

"That's a lot better than M.E.'s usually do," I said.

He smiled. "Well, this one's pretty easy, Pete. Rigor mortis usually begins within three to five hours, starting in the jaws, and takes anywhere from eight to twelve hours to become complete. In this case, the RM has progressed only to the hips. That would put the time of death at from six to eight hours ago."

I glanced at my watch. "That would mean he suicided between ten-thirty and twelve-thirty."

"Okay to take this guy down now, Pete?" Ben asked.

I looked over at the photographer. "You finished?"

He nodded, and I pulled a straight chair over to a position beneath the body, climbed up, and untied the clothesline from the pipe. I carried the body to one of the mattresses on the floor, put it down, and then untied the noose from the man's neck. I paid particular attention to the way the rope fibers had been scuffed. If they had been scuffed
toward the body, I would have known that someone had thrown the rope over the pipe and dragged the body up—which would have meant our suicide wouldn't have been a suicide at all.

But, although there was nothing suspicious about the rope fibers, there was something else very wrong. I noticed it the instant I bent down to look closely at the dead man's neck.

The rope had left a deep, purple collar around his neck, and if he had died from the rope there would have been small black-and-blue marks around the collar's lower edge. Such marks are caused by the bursting of tiny blood vessels.

There were no such marks—and that meant our man had not been alive when he was hanged. It meant we had a murder on our hands.

Les Wilbur noticed the absence of black-and-blue marks at the same moment I did. “Looks like you boys are in for more than you bargained for,” he said.

Ben stood frowning at the dead man a moment, and then he glanced over toward the woman. “Let's get started, Pete,” he said.

3.

We walked over to the woman. She had lighted another cigarette. She left it dangling from the side of her mouth as she crossed her arms across her chest and stared at us.

"You Miss Pedrick?” I asked.

She let a little smoke trickle from her nose. “That's right."

"This your apartment?"

"If you want to call it that."

"Who's the dead man?"

She shrugged. “I don't know."

"A man's found hanged in your own apartment, and you don't know who he is?"

"That's what I said. You hear pretty well—for a cop."

"When did you find him?"

"Why, the minute I got home. When'd you think?"

"How long ago was that?"

"Just a couple seconds before I went out after that cop over there. About an hour ago, I guess. I don't have a phone, so I had to go out after a cop."

"And you haven't any idea who the man is?"

"I told you I didn't. I don't know him from Adam."

"How long had you been out of your apartment?"

"Since last night."

"About what time?"
"Oh, about nine o'clock, I guess. Somewhere around there. Better say nine-thirty."

"You keep your door locked, don't you?"

"Sure. But it's a cheap spring lock. Anybody could open it."

"Is that the way you figure it?" I asked. "I mean, that he broke in and—"

"Look mister," she said. "I don't figure anything. All I know is that he got in here somehow and knocked himself off. I don't try to figure any further than that, because I don't have to. I haven't been here since last night, and I can prove it. I never saw the guy before, and you can't prove I did. Maybe he broke in to see what he could steal, and then all at once he decided to hang himself. How should I know what happened? And who cares, anyhow?"

I turned to Ben. "See if you can find any identification on him," I said. "And then look up a phone and tell them what we've got here."

He nodded and walked back toward the corpse.

I studied the woman's face a moment. She'd lived a lot of years the hard way, I could tell. It was all there in her face. And it was there in her voice too, if you listened for it. Just as the indications of lying were there. Even the best confidence men in the country are troubled with a dry throat when they lie, though they're usually very skillful at covering it up. Mrs. Pedrick wasn't skillful at all. Her voice had grown increasingly husky, and she was swallowing a lot more than was normal.

"Why don't you start telling the truth?" I asked.

"Listen, you! I—"

"Just take it easy," I said. "In the first place, I'm tired of listening to nothing. And in the second place, this isn't suicide. It's murder."

She took a half step back from me, and one hand darted up to her throat and stayed there. "Murder!" she whispered, and the word had the right ring of astonishment to it.

I nodded. "He was already dead when he was strung up there, Miss Pedrick. Does that give you another slant on things?"

She glanced about her for something to sit on, and finally moved to a stack of newspapers and sat down on that. "Lord," she said.

"You still claim you don't know him?" I asked.

She took a long time to answer. "No," she said at last. "No, I don't know him. I was telling the truth. I never saw him before in my life."

"But you do have a pretty good idea how he got into your apartment, don't you?"

She moistened her lips, glancing along her eyes toward the mattress.

"Well?" I said.

"If—if I tell you, can you keep my name out of it? Can you make it look as if you found out from someone else?"

Before I could answer her, Ben Muller came up. "No luck, Pete," he said. "Somebody clipped his wallet. There isn't even any loose change in his pocket. No tie pin or wristwatch, either. We'll have to get a make on him some other way."

I nodded. "Nose around a little. See if you can find anything."
"Okay. Want me to call the lieutenant first?"

"Yeah, I guess you'd better."

He moved away again and I turned back to Miss Pedrick. “You said you wanted us to keep your name out of it,” I said. “Who are you afraid of?”

She got to her feet slowly and stood there a moment while she rubbed the back of her hand across her forehead. “It's so close in here,” she said. “Can't we talk outside? I don't want to go out in the street, but there's sort of a little court out back. Can we go out there?”

I nodded, and then followed her through a narrow corridor and out a door into a walled-in area about twelve feet square.

"This is better,” she said. “At least we can breathe out here."

"Better start again,” I said. “And this time, tell the truth.” I gave her a cigarette, lit it for her, and then lit one for myself.

"It's one of Leda's friends,” she said. “It has to be. There's no other answer."

"Who's Leda?"

"A girl friend of mine. She—well, she was here last night. She came by the bar where I work and asked me if she could borrow my apartment, and I said all right. She had a date with someone, you see, and she wanted a place where they could be alone."

"When was this?"

"Last night—about eight o'clock."

"All right. Go on."

"Well, it wasn't the first time I'd done that. Leda always gave me ten dollars, so I could get a hotel room and have a few dollars left over. She couldn't go to a hotel room herself, because she was afraid her husband would get wind of it. He has two or three different businesses going for him, and he knows just about everybody. He gets around a lot, and so do his friends. Leda was afraid to take a chance on a hotel or a furnished room."

"But she didn't mention the name of the man she had the date with?"

"No, she didn't. She'd never done that any of the other times, either."

"She borrow your apartment often?"

"I guess you'd call it often. Sometimes she'd ask to use it a couple of times the same week, and then maybe I wouldn't see her for a week or ten days."

"You think it was always the same man, or different men each time?"

"I couldn't say. I never felt like being too inquisitive, if you know what I mean."

"You make a habit of that?"

"Of what?"

"Of loaning your apartment out to your girl friends. At ten dollars a night, and with a hotel room costing you only three or four, that could turn into a pretty profitable sideline."

Her eyes moved away from mine. “You'd find out anyhow, wouldn't you?”
"You know we would."

"Well, what was the harm in it? If I hadn't accommodated them, they'd have gone somewhere else, wouldn't they? Listen. If a woman's going to play around, she's going to play around. It was better they did it in a safe place than—"

"All right," I said wearily. "About this Leda, now. What was the arrangement supposed to be?"

"Why, just the same as it always was. I gave her my key, and told her I wouldn't be home before three or four o'clock this afternoon."

"How'd she get the key back to you?"

"She didn't. Not personally, that is. She always hid it in a crack in the stonework over the basement door. The one that leads up to the street."

"That's pretty high. She a tall girl like you?"

"Yes. She used to work in chorus lines, just like I did."

"You known her long?"

"Yes. A long time. About—oh, about fifteen years."

"And when you came home this afternoon you found the key where you expected it to be?"

"No. It wasn't there. I got a passkey from the landlord."

I took out my notebook. "What's Leda's full name, and where does she live?"

4.

She hesitated. "Listen, officer ... Isn't there some way you can keep me out of this? I've known Leda half my life. I think the world of her. So long as I thought that man had killed himself, I was willing to bluff through a story to protect her. But if it's murder, I—"

"It isn't Leda you're worried about," I said. "You might as well level with us. You've been around enough to know that the more you cooperate with cops, the easier it'll go." I paused. "All right, so who is it you're afraid of?"

"If you were in my place, you'd be afraid of him too. He—he used to be a hoodlum. Maybe he still is, for all I know. He's mean—mean all the way through. He beat up one of his best friends once, just because the guy danced with Leda a couple of times too often. Once he knocked a man unconscious, just because he brushed against Leda on the street."

"You still haven't told me who," I said.

"Leda's husband. Eddie Willard."

I wrote the name down. "Where do they live, Eddie and Leda?"

"You haven't promised to—"

"I can't promise anything," I told her. "I'll do what I can for you, yes—but I can't commit the police department that way. You should know that."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "They live at the Bayless."

"That an apartment house or a hotel?"

"Hotel. It's at the corner of West End Avenue and Sixty-second Street."
I made a note of it. “What hotel did you stay in last night?” I asked.

"The Paragon, on West Fifty-fourth."

"I know where it is. It's just down the street from the station house. What time did you leave there?"

"Well, their check-out time’s a little earlier than it is most places. At one o'clock. I—let's see—I guess I checked out about noon."

"And then what did you do?"

"I took a walk."

"Where?"

"Oh, just around. I walked over to Fifth Avenue, and up Fifth to Central Park. I went to the zoo, and watched people rowing boats on the lake a while, and then I sat down on a bench and tried to get a little sun."

"You walk home from Central Park?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You see anyone you knew?"

"On my walk? No.” Her eyes suddenly grew round. “You don't think I...?"

"I have to ask questions,” I said. “Then I have to check them out.” I took a final drag on my cigarette and flipped it away. For some reason I kept thinking about those filthy mattresses back inside. A cop sometimes turns up a lot of muck in the course of an investigation, and sometimes the stench of the muck stays with you far longer than the memory of the investigation. I had a feeling I'd be recalling those sweat-soured mattresses for a lot of years to come.

Janice Pedrick shifted her position slightly, and as she did so I noticed the play of muscles through the hard, dancer's body. She was a large girl, and a strong one. She would be physically capable of handling a small man the size of the corpse. She would have had no trouble at all stringing him up. On the other hand, the dead man had apparently been a prizefighter, supposedly capable of taking care of himself. And the girl showed no signs of having been in anything like a fight. There were no bruises or scratches, and none of her fingernails had been broken. If she'd been a party to his murder, I reasoned, she had either caught him while he was drunk or drugged—which would come out at the autopsy—or she had had help.

But there was the factor of her alibi—if it was one. I'd heard at least a hundred different suspects tell me the same tale. That walk through Central Park, with stop-offs at the zoo and lake and park bench, had worn pretty thin over the years.

Ben Muller came through the door, carrying a pink petticoat. “Take a look at this, Pete,” he said.

The petticoat was of nylon, with about six inches of lace at the bottom. It seemed to be new, but there were two large rents in the lace, and the nylon itself bore at least a dozen creases that extended almost the entire length of the garment. When I held it loosely across my forearm, the petticoat bunched itself together from top to bottom.

I glanced at Janice Pedrick. “This yours?"

She nodded.

"You wad it up like this?"

"No. It—it was hanging over the back of a chair when I left the apartment."

"Looks like we might have something,” Ben said.
The girl frowned at the petticoat, and then at Ben. “What do you mean?”

“It could have been used as a garrote,” Ben told her. “If someone grabbed it by each end, and pulled it taut, it would stretch out into a kind of rope. If you looped it around someone's neck, and tightened it up, and kept it there long to cause asphyxia, it would leave lengthwise pleats in the material—just like the ones it has in it now.”

I handed the petticoat back to Ben. “Hang on to this,” I said. “Maybe we can book it as evidence, if things fall that way. How's the doc making out?”

"He said he couldn't do anything more until he got the guy to Bellevue. I told him he could take the body. Okay?"

"Sure. You get a receipt for it?"

"Yeah.” He took out a handkerchief and sponged at the back of his neck. “Hot in there, and the stink would make a goat sick."

I turned back to Janice Pedrick. “This friend of yours—this Leda Willard—do you think she'd be home now?”

She looked at her watch. “I don't think so. She goes to work at five.”

"Where?"

"She works in a jewelry shop, down in the Village. It's not a regular store. The man she works for makes all his own things. It's just a tiny little place. He's been teaching Leda to make jewelry. She always liked doing things like that."

"How come she goes to work at five?"

"The store stays open until midnight. Leda just has a part-time job, and the only reason she works at all is because she wants to learn enough to start her own shop someday."

"What's the name of this guy she works for?"

She gave me the name—Carl Dannion—and an address on Christopher Street.

I put the notebook back in my pocket and gestured for Janice Pedrick to step back inside.

"That reminds me,” she said. “I'll have to be leaving for work myself pretty soon."

"Not tonight,” I told her.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid we'll have to ask you to spend a little time at the station house."

I had expected something of an explosion. She surprised me. All she did was glare at me a little, and then she shrugged and walked past Ben and me and into the apartment.

"You'd better call for a car, Ben,” I said. “Turn her over to a matron, and let her think about things a while. Maybe a couple of hours down there will make her feel more talkative."

"You don't want me to question her?"

"No. Just let her stew a bit."

"And then what?"

"Get a set of the dead guy's prints and take them down to BCI. See if they can give us a make on him. While they're checking, look up the tailor that made his slacks and the guy who made his shoes. Either one of them could probably give you a fast make—provided you can get hold of them."
We stepped into the apartment. Janice Pedrick was combing her hair before a yellowed mirror over the sink.

"Where'll you be, in case I want to contact you?" Ben asked.

"I'm going down to the Village."

"Hell, I figured that much. I mean afterwards."

"I'll check in at the station house as soon as I can. You do the same."

"All right."

"How do you feel."

"Sleepy."

"Yeah. Same here." I walked to the front door, then turned. "Just lock the place up when the tech boys finish," I said. "I don't think we need to leave a stakeout."

He nodded and crossed over toward Janice Pedrick.

5.

It was a little cooler in the Village, and much quieter. I went down four shallow steps and turned into the Dannion Custom Jewelry Shop. Janice Pedrick had been right about its being tiny. There was room for a very small showcase, a workbench, and not much else. The man who came up to the counter was in his late fifties, a very thin, scholarly looking man with pince-nez and a spade beard.

"Is Mrs. Willard here?" I asked.

"No. I'm sorry, but she hasn't come in yet. May I help you?" He had just a trace of accent, but I couldn't identify it.

I took out my wallet and showed him my badge. I couldn't have got much more reaction if I'd showed him a live rattlesnake. His face blanched and his forehead suddenly began to glisten with sweat.

"Are you with the FBI?" he asked.

"You didn't take a very good look at my badge," I said. "No. I'm a city detective."

He seemed to relax a bit, but not too much. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you know where Mrs. Willard is?"

He shook his head.

"She didn't call in to say she'd be late for work?"

"No, sir."

"You know any of her friends?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

"You ever see her with a very small man—a guy with a broken nose?"

"No, sir. I've never met any of her friends. I've never seen her with anyone at all."

"Not even her husband?"
"No, sir."

I put my wallet back in my pocket. I was curious about why Dannion had become so upset when he saw my badge, but I had no justification to question him about it. His personal guilts and fears were his own—unless I discovered later that they were connected in some way with the job I was on.

"I guess that's all, Mr. Dannion," I said. "Thanks very much."

"Is Mrs. Willard all right, sir? If she's in any trouble ... That is, she's a very fine young woman, and if I can be of any assistance ... "

"She'd be glad to hear that," I said. "But this is police business, Mr. Dannion. I can't discuss it with you."

I went up the steps and climbed into the RMP car and headed back uptown toward the Bayless Hotel.

6.

At the Bayless, I discovered Leda Willard and her husband had checked out at eleven o'clock that morning. They'd left no forwarding address, but they had left a considerable amount of clothing. The manager had ordered this stored for them, under the assumption that they would contact him later with instructions for forwarding or other disposition.

I got a thorough description of both of them and went back to the station house.

Ben Muller was waiting for me. He'd taken the dead man's prints to BCI, but BCI hadn't been able to match them with any in its files. The man's slacks, it seemed, hadn't been tailor-made after all, which meant that tracing them would take some time. And the bootmaker who had made his shoes had since closed his shop and gone to Europe.

I sent Ben over to the Paragon Hotel to start checking Janice Pedrick's alibi, and then I called Harry Fisher, a very good friend of mine who had once been a middleweight contender and was now writing a sports column for one of the tabloids. He knew everyone connected with the prizefight game, retired or active. I asked him if he'd go to Bellevue and see if he knew the dead man. He said he would be glad to. I gave him the phone number of the squad room, and asked him to leave a message if he should happen to call while I was out.

Then I got Headquarters on the phone and asked them to put out an alarm for the apprehension of Leda and Eddie Willard, and gave them the descriptions I'd got from the hotel manager. I asked for a run-through of the records to see if they had anything on either Willard or his wife, and then gave them Janice Pedrick's name and description and asked for a run-through on her as well.

I had Headquarters switch me to the police laboratory and asked for a report from the tech crew that had worked the murder apartment with Ben and me. They had found several sets of fairly clear fingerprints, but none of the prints had checked out to prints already on file. They were still working, and would call me as soon as they came up with anything.

I was reasonably sure the assistant M.E. wouldn't have had time to autopsy the body yet, but I called him anyway. He said that he had not been able to get the autopsy scheduled before ten o'clock the next morning, that he had tried to pull a few wires to get to it before then, but had been unable to work it.

I called the policewoman who had been with Janice Pedrick since her arrival at the station house. The policewoman said Janice had been an easy girl to talk to, but a difficult one to get anything out of. She reminded me she had a reputation for indirect questioning, and that if anyone got anything out of Janice it would be she.

I put the phone down, left a note in the message book to the effect that I would be back in twenty minutes, and went down to a restaurant on Fifty-third Street. I had two roast beef sandwiches and three cups of black coffee, and then went back to the squad room.

There was a note to call Harry Fisher on an extension at Bellevue Hospital. I called, and he told me that our dead man's name was Teddy Connors. He said Connors had been a pretty fair featherweight in the middle 30's, had retired
with all his brains and most of his money, and had since taken an occasional flyer as a fight manager and promoter. Harry had seen him around only now and then in recent years, though he had once been a steady customer of the various bars around Madison Square Garden and St. Nicholas Arena.

I thanked Harry, made a tentative date for lunch the first day both of us had a free hour, and then called BCI back again. I gave them Teddy Connors’ name and asked for a run-through.

While I was waiting, I walked to the next room and searched the cards in the Eighteenth's Known Resident Criminal File. These are the cards kept on file in the precinct where the criminal lives, no matter where he was arrested. It has his picture, his record, and the date his parole is up. In the event he was arrested with other individuals, these individuals’ names are listed on the back of the card. But there was no card for Teddy Connors.

I'd put off the paper work as long as I could, but now I sat down at a typewriter and filled out a Complaint Report form as thoroughly as I could, at this stage of the investigation, and then did the same with the other routine forms.

When I finished with the forms, I had gone as far as I could go. I had almost dozed off staring at the typewriter, so I went down to the corner and brought back a quart carton of black coffee.

I was sipping at it when Ben Muller came in.

"Any luck?" I asked.

"Maybe she took a walk, maybe she didn't," he said. “She checked out of the hotel when she said she did, but that's as far as I got.” He reached for the coffee and drank steadily until he had finished a good half of it. “You want me to talk to her, Pete?"

"Nope. Let her think a while longer."

He shrugged. “Suits me.” He sat down at his desk and put his head down on his arms. “Don't wake me up unless I inherit a million bucks, Pete.”

The phone on my desk rang. It was Tom Volz, of the Tenth.

"We got something for you, Pete," he said. “Eddie Willard."

"Where'd you grab him?"

"We didn't. He walked in."

"The hell!”

"Sure did, Pete. About two minutes ago. He says he won't talk to anybody but you. That's fine with us. We got our own troubles."

"We'll be there before you can hang up," I said.

"What's the deal?" Ben asked.

"They've got Eddie Willard, over at the Tenth."

He stood up, yawning widely. “Fine. Maybe we’ll get to bed some time this year after all.”

7.

The boys at the Tenth gave Eddie Willard and me the rear interrogation room to talk in. Willard had said he wouldn't say a word if anyone else was in the room with us, and I'd left Ben shooting the breeze with Tom Volz. Neither Willard nor I sat down. He was about my height, but a lot thicker-bodied. He had a lot of dark hair and restless dark eyes that never seemed to blink.
"I'm going to give you this fast and hard and all in one piece," he said. "I've heard of you a lot. I think I'll get a clean shake."

I nodded. "What's on your mind, Mr. Willard?"

"I heard a rumble you were looking for Leda and me. I would have turned in up at your precinct, but I didn't want to take a chance on getting tagged by some other cop before I got there."

"Where's your wife, Mr. Willard?"

"I'll get to that. First I want to tell you that I'm doing this to save my own hide. No other reason. I've done a lot for Leda in my time, and now I'm through." He paused a moment, biting at his lip. "Here it is, the whole thing. I just found out about Leda this morning, see? I've been married to her eight years, but I never knew until this morning just what a rotten woman she really was. The only reason I found out then is because she was scared crazy. She didn't kill Teddy Connors, you understand. But she'd been fooling around with him, over at Janice Pedrick's dump and all."

"Did she have any part in the killing?" I asked.

"Not exactly. Bucky Sullivan killed him. Here's the way it went. Leda was working for a guy down in the Village, a jeweler. This guy was trying to make time with her, and she kind of led him on because he slipped her a few extra bucks now and then. Anyhow, this guy—Dannion, his name is—had been knocking down on his income tax. Every time someone paid cash for something, he'd stash the money in his safe. God knows how long he'd been putting it away, but one night he got half crocked and told Leda about it. He said there was twenty thousand in the safe—and when she didn't believe him, he showed her."

I lit a cigarette and leaned up against the edge of the table. I didn't say anything.

"Well, Leda had been fooling around a lot with this goddamned Teddy Connors," Willard went on. "Connors had dropped a word now and then that made her think he might be able to do something about that twenty grand. She put it up to him, and sure enough Connors gets Bucky Sullivan, a guy he used to spar with in the old days, and the two of them went over to the jewelry shop and hit it. They got the dough all right, but Connors—he saw a chamois bag in a corner of the safe, and he took that along too, without saying anything to Bucky about it."

"What was in the bag?"

"Sapphires. About a dozen of them. Worth a lot more than diamonds. Anyhow, this jeweler reported the stones missing, and called the insurance company. But he didn't say anything about the money, because he was afraid to. He got into the country illegally, about fifteen years ago, and he knew that if the feds heard about that twenty grand and started smelling around, he might be deported." He took a deep breath. "Well, the insurance company wasn't getting anywhere. Finally they let it out in the right places that they'd pay a flat four grand for return of the stones, and no questions asked. When Bucky Sullivan got the rumble, he knew what Connors had pulled. It made him sore as hell, to think his old buddy had held out on him, and he went on the prowl."

"And caught up with him at Janice Pedrick's place?" I said.

"That's right. Leda and Connors had been shacked up there all night. This morning, Connors went out for some cigarettes. That's when Bucky saw him. He trailed him back to the apartment. He had a gun, and he forced Connors to let him in with him. He told Connors he'd let him go if Connors gave him the rocks, but Connors couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because Leda had conned him out of them. She'd sold them for peanuts. He was real gone on her, I guess. He was an ugly guy, and no woman had ever given him a tumble before. Anyhow, Bucky went nuts. He hit Connors across the throat with the side of his hand and knocked him out. Then he clipped Leda over the temple with the butt of his gun. She fell down and made out she was unconscious, but she wasn't. Then Bucky grabbed a rag or something and started choking Connors. He turned his back on Leda a moment, and she saw her chance and jumped up and beat it."
I rubbed my cigarette out in a tray, studying him. “Why'd you and your wife check out of your hotel, Mr. Willard?”

"I must have been a little crazy myself, I guess. Leda—she was almost nuts. She thought sure her part in the jewelry heist would come out, once they really got to checking. She'd done a bit out on the West Coast once, for fingering another guy to a burglar—and that's something else I didn't know till this morning. And she said it'd be her word against Bucky's, and that she might end up in the death house with him. Anyhow, I couldn't think straight, right at first. All I could think about was trying to help her get away. And then all at once it hit me, what a goddamned fool I'd been all these years. And all of a sudden I knew I wasn't going to be a nanny for her any more. I'd had a gut full of her. It was like I was seeing her for the first time since I'd known her."

"If she's earned a fall, then she's going to take it alone—is that what you mean?"

"You're damned right. I've been a chump long enough. From now on, she's on her own."

"Where is she now?"

"She's in room fourteen-oh-nine, at the Milsener Hotel."

8.

We picked up Leda Willard. She was in such a state of panic that it took us almost two hours to get a coherent story from her. But when we did, it was a complete admission. She was too frightened to fight us, even too frightened to be capable of lying. She completely absolved Janice Pedrick and Eddie Willard of any implication.

Four nights later we cornered Bucky Sullivan in the men's room of a bar in Harlem. He shot it out with us, and took two slugs through the chest. While he was waiting to be operated on, he became convinced he was dying and called for a priest. Afterward, he made a full admission. Declarations by persons who think they are dying are powerful instruments. It was powerful enough to close the case for us, though Bucky Sullivan lived through the operation.

He was very bitter toward the doctor who saved him. He couldn't understand why the State should save his life—only to send him up the river and take it away from him again in the electric chair.
Tonight Lynette McCaffrey was wearing a short red skirt that seemed all torn and jagged around the edge, like fringe; and when George Burton, watching through the open window, looked more carefully, he saw that it was fringe. Above the skirt was a thin blouse that you could see through, and above that, a small close-fitting hat of silver straw, with her brown curls bunched out below the curling brim. On her feet were flat sandals, the kind that children used to wear. He had never seen a fringed skirt before, or sandals on a girl her age, or a hat at the Yacht Club dance. As if her beauty alone was not enough to set her apart, it was like Lynette McCaffrey to wear something different, to create a new style, to get herself looked at and talked about. George Burton followed her around the floor with his eyes, and hoped that it was love.

The small orchestra from the city was playing Hindustan and she was dancing with Arthur Wallace again. Art had on white flannels and a blue double-breasted jacket with shining brass buttons. The flannels were certainly his own, because he had been wearing them all summer long at the Saturday night dances. George Burton said aloud, “Damn Dad anyway,” feeling a momentary burst of anger that frightened him.

He looked around quickly to see if anybody had heard. There was no one. He was alone on the raised edge of weather-beaten planks that ran alongside the Clubhouse to the broad pier fronting the bay. But if his father had only let him borrow his white flannels, which fitted perfectly all right if he tightened the belt enough, he might have had a chance with a girl like Lynette McCaffrey.

The music ended with a matched crescendo of piano and banjo, and Lynette and Art strolled from the floor toward the open doors at the bay end. She did not applaud, as the other girls did, and when Art Wallace saw how indifferent she was, he arrested his palms in midair and didn't applaud either. She reached into a side pocket of Art's jacket and drew out a pack of cigarettes. Right in front of everybody she put one in her mouth and tilted her face up for a light. Then, with the cigarette hanging from her lip in the most wonderful way, she passed through the doors and out to the pier.

George Burton had never felt so lonely, but he was not, except for one brief moment, really unhappy. He loved from afar, and merely to look on was enough. In fact he was almost happy. He waited for, and appreciated, each new feeling of exaltation; and when these came, he felt a strong new sense of being older, aware that he was experiencing himself in a way that he never had before. But Lynette was out of sight now, so after another minute he moved along the raised beam toward the open pier.

It was a marvelous August night, cool and clear, and there was a yellow moon hanging over the bluff at the far end of the bay, right over that part of the Bluff where his parents' cottage was. He heard the wash and slap of the small waves against the pilings beneath the wharf, and he saw the gently swaying night lights, and their bobbing reflections, on the sailboats anchored offshore. Several couples stood around in the light that streamed from the Clubhouse, waiting for the band to start up again. Then he found Lynette McCaffrey.

She was seated on the flat top of one of the low iron posts at the edge of the pier. Four or five fellows hovered about her admiringly, but George knew they were thinking far more of themselves and the figures they cut than they were of her; not one of them could begin to appreciate how marvelous she was. He edged closer to listen, but not near enough, he thought, to be seen. He heard her say, “Just look at that moon.” Then, in the most matter-of-fact tone, as if she had been merely commenting on the weather, she added: “It's as yellow as piss”—and George Burton fell in love for good and all.

Lynette McCaffrey was the new girl that summer. Her family was from Cleveland, and she not only thought, but said openly, that Parsons Point was dead. What on earth was there to do in a dump like this, why didn't somebody put some life in the old place, where were all the mean men?—things like that. It had never occurred to George Burton before that the Point was dead, but he accepted the idea at once. Well, not really. It was dead for her—how could it help being?—but with a girl like Lynette McCaffrey around, it was far from dead for him.

For almost a month, now, every single day had been different, and better, than last year, because of the certainty and promise that sometime or other before nightfall, he would run into Lynette McCaffrey not once or twice but several
times: sailing on the bay, having a soda at Mike's, climbing the steep path to her cottage on the Bluff (and not leaning forward in the effort, as nearly everybody else did), sunning herself in a yellow or red or green bathing suit on the pier where the Wrinkle came in (actually swimming was for kids), or, dressed in a fresh new frock in the late afternoon, sauntering down to the post office below the Bluff to get the evening mail. When they met, he always waited for her to speak first, and she always did. “Hi, Georgie,” she said, in the most democratic fashion. He hated being called Georgie by anybody, but when she said it, somehow it became her own special name for him, private and intimate as if it were something between them, a kind of secret that was his and hers together.

George Burton was going on seventeen, and he had heard that Lynette was almost two years older. But because he was as tall and nearly as grown-up looking as she was, he hoped nobody had told her how young he was. The fellows she hung around with were all her own age and pretty sophisticated, which was why he didn't like to talk with her in their presence—their snappy line always showed him up—and this was also why he avoided joining the little group around her now. But suddenly, to his astonishment, thrill, and a funny feeling in his stomach something like stage fright, Lynette called out to him in the dark: “Why Georgie Burton, what are you doing skulking around in the shadows like a—like I don't know what?” And while the fellows laughed, she added: “Come on over here where you belong!”

It was wonderful. Lynette McCaffrey had said it herself; and as he went over and stood beside her, he felt that maybe he did belong. Then the music started up, Lynette reached out a hand toward Hank Van Duser, and let herself be pulled to her feet. “I promised Van this one, but Georgie, will you dance the next one with me? I haven't danced with you once all summer. Not once! Here, take my cigarette ... “ George Burton took her cigarette between thumb and forefinger and Lynette moved off toward the lighted dance floor arm in arm with Van.

The small orchestra was playing Oh Gee, Say Gee, and George stood there on the dark wharf holding the cigarette. Everybody else had gone in. He looked at the cigarette. It was a gold-tipped Violet Milo rapidly getting shorter and shorter, now, as it burned down to the end. In a few seconds he would have to throw it away, and he didn't want to do that. Of course he didn't expect it to last all through the dance, till Lynette and Hank came back out again, but he wanted to keep it as long as he could. Finally he held it up to his lips, took a small short puff, then dropped it over the side of the pier into the water. Because of the music, he did not hear the tiny hiss it must have made as it hit the water.

The moon, rising higher over the Bluff at the far end of the bay, was getting smaller now, and it was also paler, whiter, no longer the color that Lynette had said it was—said in a way that nobody else on earth, certainly no other girl, would have described it. Her word had almost taken his breath away, but it had been exactly right, and he was filled with admiration for her originality and daring. The thought of dancing with her, actually holding her in his arms at last, right in front of all the other fellows, was a thought almost too much to bear; and he hoped he could bring it off in a casual fashion, or at least that it would look that way.

He stood there listening, waiting, and now the piano was going it alone, accompanied for the moment only by the drummer, who slapped the big drum softly with a pair of wire flyswatters which gave off a whispering, swishing sound, just right for the piano solo. He looked through the open door into the brightly-lighted Clubhouse and saw Lynette, her head in its silver straw bonnet resting on Hank Van Duser's shoulder, gazing up into Van's face as they moved slowly around the floor. He could have watched her forever. It was almost as good as the dream that was to be realized any minute now.

The tune came to an end and Van and Lynette and a bunch of others sauntered out onto the dark pier again.

She looked for and found him sitting on the iron post where she had sat. She came up to him at once and placed her two hands on his shoulders in the friendliest, the most affectionate gesture in the world. His heart swelled with pride as he saw how the other fellows noticed. She said, her voice a breathless thrilling stage-whisper, so personal, so intimate, almost like a kind of lovemaking: “Georgie honey, I've made a ghastly mistake. I could simply kill myself. Van reminded me that I promised the next dance to that fool of a Freddie Vincent, and then after that it's Art Wallace again, and then Van, and—that's the way it goes, kid. So listen, honey, why don't we do this? Next Saturday night I promise to save you two dances for just you and me alone. I'm just as sorry as I can be, I'm simply crushed and heartbroken. But I'll make it up to you next time, Georgie, honest and true.”

The word honey struck him to the heart, but he said, “Why sure, that's okay, I understand, don't give it another
thought.” He avoided looking at the other fellows standing around, and concentrated on Lynette’s face alone, giving her a smile that he hoped looked all right and that she could see, and the others could see too, in the half-dark of the wharf. Immediately, then, Lynette fell into an animated conversation with the fellows standing around, and he heard her make fun of that silly little orchestra from the so-called city—(“Do they actually have the gall to call themselves a dance orchestra, and my word, why don’t they play something that isn’t about a thousand years old!”)—and he heard the fellows laugh. It was so like Lynette; it was all part of that wonderful outside world she came from, the great world of the future, far away from Arcadia and Parsons Point.

There was more than two hours to wait before the dance would be over at twelve and the Wrinkle would take them back home across the bay to the Bluff. When Freddie Vincent came and took her off to the dance floor, George Burton got up and went back along the weather-beaten planks beside the Clubhouse to the dirt road in back. He walked slowly down the dark lane to the brightly-lighted street where the bowling alley was, and the hot dog stand and the cheap dance hall that the nicer people didn’t go to. He bought himself a hot dog and stood outside the dance hall looking in. It was one of those ten-cents-a-dance places, where you could go, girls as well as men, without escorts or a proper date. He watched the couples toddling around the floor. Some of the girls were pretty enough, but they were working girls for the most part, and there wasn’t one of them in the whole place who had what Lynette McCaffrey had. What that was, he couldn’t have said. It was a mysterious something that he had never before found in anyone else, and he knew it was love, all the more so because of his hurt.

Keenly he felt his unhappiness, and he knew that all these strangers in the street, all these callous people who never felt anything, could not possibly know what he was feeling, or, if they did know, understand. It was something he himself had not felt before, ever, and he believed that there could not be many others in this world who had ever felt it, either. It was special and delicious and painful all at once, he knew that it set him apart, and he felt both lonelier and bigger, more capable of feelings, than anybody else had ever felt.

It was life, in short. Oh, there was no fun in being so vulnerable, so much more sensitive than other fellows, but wasn’t that part of love, didn’t it go with falling in love, could a man have one without the other—didn’t it come from being more aware and susceptible to life than the common herd? He turned away from the dancing gay throng so ignorant of the deeper finer things, and wandered off alone toward the upper end of the Point, hugging his misery to himself ...

Finally he heard the three deep notes of the Wrinkle whistle, which meant that the boat was leaving for the Bluff in five minutes. He hurried back.

The lights on the pier had been turned on, and a dozen or more couples who had been at the Yacht Club dance were crowding around for the trip home. The Wrinkle was a small narrow steamer, hardly bigger than a big launch, with a brightly-lighted cabin lined on both sides with a continuous leather-cushioned bench and an open deck above with a single bench athwart the steamer just in front of the small glassed-in place where the pilot stood at the wheel. By the time the final whistle blew, everybody was on board, the engines started up with a deep whine, the propeller churned the water at the stern into a noisy swirling foam, and they were off.

Lynette McCaffrey, her legs crossed and one sandalled foot swinging, sat between Art Wallace and Hank Van Duser. She was smoking a cigarette against all the rules of the Wrinkle; while the engines were in motion, smoking was not even permitted on the upper deck, much less inside in the cabin. Blowing directly onto their backs and necks, a chill wind streamed into the open windows as the boat gathered speed, colder in a way, because nobody was dressed for it, than a winter wind—the kind of chill wind that blows across the water on a summer midnight. Some of the girls huddled against their partners’ shoulders, and the fellows put their arms around them. There was a great deal of laughter and lively talk, tossed back and forth among the passengers, but it all rang hollow and false in George Burton’s ear. Feeling out of it, wanting to be alone, he got up and turned toward the ladder-like steps that went up to the open deck above. Just as he began the climb, Lynette called out:

"Georgie! Don’t go up there, kid. You're probably all sweaty after the dance and you'll catch your death."

"I'll be all right,” he answered casually over his shoulder, and disappeared above.

He sat down on the bench in front of the pilot’s cabin and folded his arms. It was wonderful the way she had said “sweaty”; every single one of the silly girls he knew would have said “perspiration.” He was not a bit sweaty, of
course, because he had not danced a single dance; but all the same, in a minute or two he began to be very cold. He sat there in the night wind shivering as if with a chill, and he thought of what Lynette had said about catching his death. He hoped he would. She had warned him, and he had ignored her warning. He hoped she would remember this, a few days from now, and remember, too, how he had gone up to the upper deck just the same, as if he just didn't care....

The *Wrinkle* was out in the middle of the bay now, and he saw the lights on Garfield and Cedar Island far off on one side, and a few lights still showing in the long row of cottages that lined the narrow sand bar between the bay and Lake Ontario. The bar shone palely in the moonlight, outlined against the expanse of the lake beyond, bright and wide in the moonlight like the open sea; it was like a reef or magic atoll of the South Seas, and he murmured: “Yon palm-fringed incandescent coast ... ” The bar was only a piddling strip of gravelly sand strung with a lot of cheesy shacks that passed for cottages and a few moth-eaten cottonwood trees, but the effect was all right....

They'll be sorry, he said to himself, a few days from now or next week, maybe, when he didn't turn up at the dance —though of course the news would get around long before then. They'd remember a lot of things about him and tell each other that he was a pretty darn nice guy after all and wish they had paid more attention to him while they had the chance. At the end of the season Lynette McCaffrey would go home to her set in Cleveland and tell them all that though Parsons Point was just a dump where there was nothing to do at all, where you simply went crazy sitting around all day doing nothing, there was one of the most wonderful fellows there that she had ever known in her life and before she got a chance to know him very well, the most terrible thing happened—it had plunged the whole place into the most awful gloom ... He gazed across the dark racing waters of the bay and thought: Next week all this will be the same, all this will be here, and I will not....

When the *Wrinkle* pulled in at the wharf below the Bluff and they all piled out, he waited till the last passenger had left the cabin before he climbed down the ladder and got off. In the moonlit dark he heard the cries of “So long” and “See you tomorrow” as the group broke up and the fellows took home their dates. Then he started up the steep path of the Bluff alone, careful to hang back so that he would not overtake those who were walking slowly on, arm linked in arm, ahead of him.

He came in through the back door of his parents’ cottage and reached overhead for the string of the kitchen light. By now he really was sweaty, his shirt was sticking to his back under the tweed jacket, and he was chilled through and through. On the white oilcloth of the table he found a note in pencil from his mother, written on one of those oblong cards found in Shredded Wheat packages and held down by a saltcellar so that it wouldn't blow away in the breeze that came in strong through the screen door:

"Be sure and empty the ice pan and this time *don't forget!!!*"

He smiled sadly to himself. What did his mother know—what did anybody know—of what had been happening to him this night, what he had been through and what he was feeling in his heart....

When he went out to his cot on the sleeping porch, which was open on three sides to the cold night breeze, he found that his mother had left his pajamas for him beside the pillow and turned the blankets down, ready for him to get in. An idea came to him. He stripped off the blankets and even the sheet, rolled them up in a great bundle and fired them into a corner of the porch; then he fired his pajamas after them. He would sleep raw tonight and really catch that death, just as Lynette McCaffrey had said he would. He started taking off his clothes.

But when he got down to his B.V.D.’s, it occurred to him that maybe it wasn't nice to go to bed naked, not when he was in love. If it had been just any old tramp, that would have been a different thing; but if he was going to do this because of a girl like Lynette McCaffrey, it wouldn't be quite decent for them to find him in the morning lying there without a stitch on. He got on the bed in his underwear and lay flat on his back with his arms folded under his head and gazed off into the freezing night. He made every effort to lie rigid and stiff as a ramrod but it was difficult, because his body was shaken again and again by shudders of chill. But he refused to accept his physical feelings; he recognized only feelings far different, deeper, and truer. He had heard about mind-over-matter and he concentrated intensely on his emotion and his thoughts. Now another line of poetry sprang unpremeditated into his head and with a melancholy satisfaction he thought it was the most wonderful thing that had ever been thought or said in the world —why, it was as if it had been written for him alone:
"Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain . . . "

Suddenly he was wakened out of a deep sleep by a violent shaking that was not of the cold. He rolled over and sat up, startled. His mother stood there beside the cot, her hand on his shoulder, scolding him unmercifully.

"George Burton, are you out of your mind! What's the big idea of going to bed on a night like this without a blanket over you or even a sheet, for heaven's sakes? And my stars, sleeping in your underwear—are you crazy?" Scolding away, she fished up the roll of blankets and sheet from the corner of the porch, shook them out and spread them over his cot, tucking him carefully in on all sides. He didn't say a word to her but he was very grateful and surprised at himself all the same, as he was just about dying of the cold and he didn't think he could stand it another minute.

"Goodness knows how long you've been lying there exposed to the world like that—do you realize it's after two o'clock in the morning? Good thing for you, young man, that I got up to see if you were in! Really, George Burton, you're simply not to be trusted at all.... "

When she had gone back to her own room, he lay there with the blankets wrapped up tight and warm around his neck. He was asleep before he had time to think, almost before he had time to realize that above every other person on earth he hated Lynette McCaffrey....

In the morning he knew he would find her sunning, alone, on the pier. There was a small spur of pride in him as he told himself how he had finally seen through her. He was sure now that she had led him on, and that she had nearly made him kill himself.

" ... To cease upon the midnight with no pain," he quoted to himself again. But it would be broad daylight now, and he didn't suppose it would be absolutely painless ...

He went up to meet Lynette McCaffrey with no weapon but his hands, and he didn't even give a thought to what must inevitably come after.

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NICE BUNCH OF GUYS by MICHAEL FESSIER

All the taxi drivers and the fellows who hung around the pool hall would tell you that Marty was a laugh; you should've seen him when the boys got him burnt up about something. He was more fun than a circus, was Marty. Not exactly crazy enough to be put in the nut house or anything like that, just goofy enough to be really pretty darn funny.

He sold papers at the station. They were Posts and Marty yelled something that sounded like "Whoa", so all the fellows got a great kick out of yelling "Giddiap! Whoa!" at him and making him mad. He got screwy when they did that. He'd come across the street with his dirty checkered cap pulled down over one side of his face and his twisted mouth all squeezed up into a snarl.

"You old bootleggers," he'd say. "You old bootleggers!" The fellows got a special kick out of Marty calling 'em bootleggers and they'd laugh like anything. "I'm gonna get you," Marty would say. "Just you wait and see. You'd better not make fun of me."

"Aw, gosh! Don't scare us like that," one of the fellows would say, and everybody'd laugh again. Everyone would gather around. There was always a laugh when you had Marty going. He'd lay his papers on the sidewalk and double up his fists. "Wanna fight?" he'd ask. Then everybody'd act afraid and beg Marty not to hit 'em. Of course they weren't afraid. Marty was just a little fellow and any of the fellows could have licked him easy with one hand. They were just kidding him for a laugh. Even Old Ironsides—that's what they called the corner cop—would come by and grin at Marty standing with his fists doubled up and acting like he was a tough guy.

They'd keep on kidding Marty and he'd start squealing like a stuck pig, he'd get so mad. You couldn't understand what he was saying when he got mad like that. Just a lot of cuss words that didn't make sense. And his mouth would froth like he was a mad dog or something.

Then somebody'd act like he really was going to fight Marty. He'd double up his fist and prance around and wiggle his arms and say, "All right, Marty, look out!" and he'd make a couple passes at Marty. "Come on, put 'em up," the fellow would say, "I'm gonna knock your can off." Then Marty'd start whimpering like a little kid. He'd rub his eyes and back away and say, "You'd better not. You'd better not. I'll tell the cops, that's what I'll do." Then he'd grab his papers and run like hell back across the street. Gee, it was funny!

It wouldn't be no time before he'd forget all about it and he'd be walking up and down the station platform yelling "Whoa, Whoa," or something that sounded like that. He sold a lot of papers because people felt sorry for him, I guess. He kept all his money in one pocket and when there wasn't anybody around he'd take it out and count it. He'd count his money seventy times a day. Guess it was the biggest kick he got out of life. And you couldn't get him to spend a nickel. Nobody knew what he did with his money. He was nutty about money.

He was always begging for it. "Gimme a nirkel," he'd say, looking up at somebody. "Aw, go on, gimme a nirkel. Please," he'd say, "go on, please gimme a nirkel." It was funny the way he said nickel. There was something the matter with his tongue and he couldn't talk straight. He'd do anything for a nickel and that's no kidding. He'd do anything. Sometimes when the fellows were drunk they'd get Marty in the back room of the pool hall and if you'd been there you'd seen there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for a nickel.

But one of the biggest kicks was when the fellows would kid Marty about his girls. Of course he didn't have any. He was about thirty years old and he had a face like a monkey. His chin sprouted long black hairs that grew far apart and the fellows said he had pig's bristles instead of whiskers. I don't think he ever shaved but the whiskers didn't get any longer. It was funny to think of him having a girl. Gosh, no girl'd even look at him. Even the Mexican woman would chase him away when he'd go to her shack across the tracks and say what the fellows had put him up to saying.

"Hey, Marty," the fellows would say, "who's that hot number we saw with you last night?" And Marty'd grin sly, like he really had been out with a girl, and he'd say, "Nonna yer bursness" or something like that. And they'd say, "Can't you fix it up for us? Gee, she was a hot number. Oh, boy!" Marty'd act real proud like he really could and
he'd say, “Naw sir, not youse guys. Not youse guys. Th'ell wit' ya.”

The funniest thing was when somebody'd ask Marty what he did to the girl. It was a scream. He couldn't even pronounce the word right. “Aw, you never had one in your life,” they'd tell him and he'd get mad. “Tha's all you know,” he'd say. “Tha's all you know.” All Marty knew about things like that was what he heard the fellows saying in the pool hall. But you'd thought he did all 'em himself the way he talked.

A girl would go by on the other side of the street and the fellows would whisper, “Hey, Marty, that your girl?” And he'd say, “Sure,” and they'd act surprised and say “Gosh, Marty, you ever—?” And he'd wink like he'd seen the fellows do and say, “Yeah, sure.” Sometimes the woman would be the banker's wife or the girl that played the organ at the church but Marty'd say sure everytime. It didn't matter who it was, he'd say the same thing. The fellows always got a laugh out of that.

One of the worst things Marty could think to call a guy was a bootlegger. The fellows around the taxi stand used to tell him that George Burke, the lawyer, was going to have him put in jail. Marty'd go white every time you mentioned jail to him. He was goofy, but he liked his freedom more'n anybody you ever saw. So when the fellows'd rib him up about Burke he'd get scared stiff, then crazy mad. He'd go running past Burke's office fast's he could, yelling, “Burke's an old bootlegger! Burke's an old bootlegger! Yeah, Burke's an old darn bootlegger!” Burke was a little red-faced guy and he'd get hopping mad but he never did anything about it. He knew the people would think it was small potatoes for a big lawyer to pick on a half-wit. So he couldn't do anything. Anytime we wanted a boot we'd rib up Marty to go after Burke. You should've seen it.

The fellows all got a kick out of ribbing Marty, but they wouldn't stand for anybody picking on him. One time they told Marty the reporter for another paper was playing dirty tricks on the Post, the paper Marty sold. You'd thought Marty owned the Post the way he was willing to fight for it. He couldn't read, but he'd get sore as hell if you told him the Post wasn't any good. The fellows kept telling Marty this fellow Danny McLeod was scooping the Post and things like that until Marty was hopping mad. One day Danny came walking down the street and one of the fellows said, “There's the dirty punk that's been scooping your paper, Marty. Why don't you sock him?” Marty's mouth got twisted worse than ever and he started biting his lips. When Danny got near him he all of a sudden ran out and hit him on the mouth. You could've knocked the fellows over with a feather. They didn't think Marty had guts enough to hit anybody.

Danny's lip was split right down the middle and blood ran down his chin onto his shirt. He doubled up his fists and acted like he was going to sock Marty back and the fellows came closer. Danny didn't sock Marty, though. He just turned and walked away. If he had started to hit Marty the fellows would have piled him. The fellows got a kick out of ribbing Marty but they wouldn't stand for anyone picking on him. They were as nice a bunch of guys as you'd ever find.

After that every time Danny would come by the pool hall the fellows would yell, “Better run, Danny, here comes Marty.” Then they'd all laugh and Danny would walk faster. Pretty soon he got so he wouldn't come by the pool hall any more. Danny was all right but he couldn't take a little kidding.

It made Marty cocky as hell. He went around town bragging about how he licked Danny and every time anybody wanted a laugh they'd say, “Hey, Marty, what'd you do to Danny?” and Marty'd stick out his chest and say, “I beat him up. Yeah, I beat him up.” It sure made Danny's life miserable for him and it gave the fellows a lot of laughs.

One of the best jokes the fellows pulled on Marty was about Marge, the red-headed girl who worked at the coffee joint next to the station. It was a lulu of a joke and we had more darn fun, only Marty spoiled it. You'd have never thought Marty would do a thing like that but it just goes to show you how screwy he was. The fellows started telling Marty that Marge was in love with him. At first he'd grin and say, “You can't kid me, you can't kid me. You're jus' kiddin', 'ats all.” But the fellows kept it up. “Of course, she likes you, Marty,” they'd say. “She's goofy about you. She told us so.” “Did she?” Marty'd ask. “Did she, hones?” and he'd lick his lips and look across at the coffee joint.

"I bet if you bought her some candy she'd fall hard for you,” one of the fellows told him one day. “You think so?” Marty asked, all excited. “Sure,” the fellow said. “Try it and see.” So by God Marty did try it. Marge came walking by on her way to work one night and Marty popped out of the pool hall and stuck a bar of five-cent candy in her hand. “Here,” he said, and started giggling. When he giggled his lips got all slobbery and he looked like he was
blowing soap bubbles. The bar of candy was all squeezed up and dirty like Marty'd hung onto it in his pocket all afternoon. Gosh, the fellows roared. “Oh, Marge,” they said, “who's your boy friend?” Marge's face got red's a beet. “It isn't funny,” she said. “He means well. Thanks, Marty,” she said, and walked away fast.

And maybe you think the fellows didn't razz Marge after that! “Hey, Marge,” they'd yell, “how's your boy friend?” She'd flush and walk faster and it was always good for a laugh. Marty started hanging around the coffee joint when Marge was working and the owner had to kick him out almost every night. Sometimes he'd give her a bar of candy and sometimes it'd be some flowers he'd swiped out of somebody's yard. She'd take ‘em so's not to hurt his feelings but the fellows would play like she really was in love with him. Whenever they saw her they'd ask when was she getting married and things like that. Boy, did it burn her up!

Marty got so he thought Marge really was his girl. “Who's your girl, Marty?” the fellows would ask, and Marty would grin sly as the dickens and say, “Aw, you know, you know,” and he'd giggle and bubbles would come on his mouth. Then the fellows would say, “Hey, Marty, we saw you out with another jane last night. What's the idea? Trying to ditch Marge?” Marty'd get all excited and beg 'em not to tell Marge that. Gosh, it was funny how serious he took the thing. “What do you and Marge do when you go out?” the fellows would ask, and Marty'd grin, “You know,” he'd say, and then he'd lick his lips and look across the street where she worked.

It was the darnedest, funniest thing you ever saw, until Marty spoiled it. You never can tell what a goofy guy'll do and Marty was like the rest of ‘em.

One night the fellows were hanging around the taxi stand in front of the pool hall when they heard a woman screaming like she'd been murdered or something. Before they could figure out where it was coming from, Marge came running into the light out of the alley. Her dress was torn and her face was bloody like it'd been scratched. Her hair was down over her shoulders and she looked like she'd seen a ghost or something. Her eyes were bugged out and she didn't seem to see. She just screamed and screamed. Finally Ironsides found out what it was all about and the fellows all ran down the alley. She stood alone on the corner and kept on screaming. It was awful.

The fellows found Marty hiding behind a garbage can, crying. “I didn't mean to do it,” he said. “Don't let them put me in jail.” When they got him in jail and started asking him questions he acted like a kid that's been caught stealing candy or something. “I won't do it again,” he said. He'd wipe his eyes with his fists and spread dirt all over his face. “Did she tell on me?” he'd ask.

Of course they had to send Marty to the nut house at Stockton. They were afraid he'd bust loose again. He bawled like a kid for three days after they told him what they were going to do, until they took him away. What worried him was he'd be cooped up and wouldn't get to go up and down the streets selling papers. The deputy that took him to Stockton said he didn't fight. He just bawled like a kid.

What made the fellows sore about the whole thing was the way Marge acted when she got out of the hospital. You know how women are. You never know what makes ‘em click. Marge was that way. She got the notion the fellows were to blame. That's a hot one, isn't it? How could the fellows been to blame when they weren't anywhere near when it happened? It made them mad the way she started treating 'em. When they went into the coffee joint she treated 'em like dogs, wouldn't kid with them or anything. Never so much as a smile or a pleasant word. The fellows started staying away from the place, so the owner canned Marge. You couldn't blame him.

It seemed what Marty did to her and losing her job and all kind of made her screwy herself. Before she left town she met one of the fellows on the street and he told her he was sorry about her losing her job. “If you'd treated the fellows decent,” he said, “the boss would of kept you.” Well, sir, she scratched his face something awful, and he had to slap her good to make her quit. He wasn't the kind of fellow that hits women, but women haven't got a right to scratch a fellow's face when he hasn't done anything. Old Ironsides, the cop, agreed with the fellow. He told Marge to get out of town or he'd run her out.

The fellows sometimes say how funny it seems without Marty going up and down the streets yelling “Whoa! Whoa!” They sure used to get a kick out of him.

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At exactly 8:13 A.M. Mr. Petty arrived. He hung his hat in the locker, just as he had hung it every working day of his life for the last thirty years. He went over to the water cooler where he wet his dry, tense throat with a small sip of water. Then he shuffled down the hall to the door marked: George V. Benson, General Manager.

Mr. Petty waited till his wrist watch showed precisely 8:15. Then he opened the door, walked in, closing it carefully behind him.

Mr. Benson looked up at the little bookkeeper.

"Always prompt, aren't you, Petty?"

Mr. Petty gulped. "Yes, sir. You said 8:15, sir."

"So, here you are. At exactly 8:15. Now, if you weren't the fool you are, Petty, you would have come at 7:15. You would have gone straight to the safe and opened it—you know the combination—and you would have helped yourself, not to a measly three thousand dollars, but to two hundred thousand dollars."

The little bookkeeper's eyes opened wide in innocent astonishment. "I couldn't have done a thing like that," he stammered. "Why—that would be stealing."

"That's right," Mr. Benson said. "That would have been stealing. So what do you do instead? You pilfer the petty cash, you make false entries on your books, you kite checks, a few measly bucks at a time—for how many months? And when you're three thousand dollars in the hole and you know the auditors are due in Monday morning, you come to me with a hard luck story. What was it, horses?"

"No, sir," Mr. Petty said. "That would be gambling!" He paused and looked down at the floor. "Women," he said meekly.

"Women!"

"Yes sir," Mr. Petty said. "Women. It's in my horoscope. I'm a Taurus."

"That figures," Benson said. "Now tell me one thing more, Petty. How do you expect to pay this money back?"

Mr. Petty looked puzzled. He squirmed uneasily in his chair. "That's what I was expecting you to tell me. You promised to help me, Mr. Benson."

Benson said, "Of course, I'll help you. Everybody knows George Benson has never failed to help a faithful employee out of a jam." He sat back in his chair and folded his arms silently for a minute while Mr. Petty fidgeted with his hands, as if he had just found he had one too many.

"Tell you what I'll do, Petty," Benson said. "Nobody knows about this, nobody except you—and me. I'll lend you the money, that's what I'll do. Just sign this—" he handed a typewritten sheet of paper across the desk— "and you can pay me back ten dollars every week out of your paycheck." He handed his pen across to the little bookkeeper. "Just a brief statement of the facts. Sort of a confession, you know, just to make it legal."

Mr. Petty took the pen. His hand shook as he started to write, and paused. "The money," he said falteringly. "Shouldn't I—get the money first?"

Mr. Benson's face took on an expression of injured dignity. "I'm surprised at you, Petty," he said. "Do you expect me to go around every day with thousands of dollars in my wallet?" He looked at his watch. "The bank closes at one today. And Monday is a bank holiday. Before I take the plane to Pittsburgh this afternoon I'll leave three thousand dollars in an envelope for you. You'll find it in the safe, in the petty cash box."
"But I've got things to do first," Mr. Petty said. "I've got to go back over the books. There are things to straighten out before the auditors get here."

"I've thought of that too," Benson replied. "You've got keys to the plant. Tomorrow is Sunday. Come down and let yourself in. Emil, the night watchman, knows you. Tell him you're working overtime on the books. Get the entries straightened out, put the money back where it belongs, and when the auditors arrive on Monday everything'll be okay. I'll take that paper now."

Mr. Petty scrawled his name on the dotted line and handed the paper back to Benson. "Thank you," he said, rising to go. "I'll never forget what you've done for me." He swallowed hard. "You've saved my life. How can I ever repay you?"

"You will," Benson assured the little bookkeeper. "Don't worry, you will."

2.

On warm Saturday afternoons it was John J. Malone's custom to take his ease, with suitable refreshments, at Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar, but on this torrid Saturday afternoon he was still in the office, attending to some urgent business. Maggie, his secretary, was assisting with the technical details.

"I distinctly remember replenishing the Emergency file," Malone was saying. "Right there in back of Bills Payable."

"I looked," Maggie said firmly. "I looked, and it isn't there. Are you sure you didn't drink it up one night this week when you were alone in the office? And speaking of bills payable—"

The door opened in the outer office and Maggie went to attend to it.

"If it's the building agent after the rent tell him the police are dragging the Drainage Canal for my remains," Malone called after her.

A minute later Maggie was back. "It's a Mr. Algernon Petty," she reported. "He says it's important."

"Didn't you tell him I was busy on an important case?" Malone said, in a voice that he knew, by actual test, carried practically out into the hall. Then, under his breath to Maggie, "You'd better call up right away and tell them to send over a quart of the usual."

"Not so fast," Maggie said. "If you ask me, Mr. Petty looks more like a fast touch than a fat retainer," and, opening the door, she showed in the little bookkeeper.

What met the legal eye was a very frightened and nervous Mr. Petty. He patted the chair before sitting down in it, as if he expected it to be wired for an execution.

"You'll have to excuse me," he began haltingly. "You see, Mr. Malone, I've never had anything to do with the law before. Of course I expect to pay—" He fished a tired ten-dollar bill out of his wallet, stole a speculative glance at Malone out of the corner of his eye, and decided to add another ten. "I know your professional services come high," he explained, "but mine is a serious case, I'm afraid."

"What do you expect me to do, Mr. Petty?" Malone asked. "Arrange a settlement for you with Gloria Vanderbilt?"

The little bookkeeper looked puzzled. "But I don't even know Gloria Vanderbilt. No, it's Carmelita. Of course I never really promised to marry Carmelita, but, well, you know how women are."

Malone said, "I see. Something in the nature of a breach of promise."

"Something like that," Mr. Petty said. "And I thought you might see her for me and—well, lawyers know how to handle such things."

"And how much would you be prepared to go to avoid embarrassment, Mr. Petty? Say a cool million or so?"
“Oh no, nothing like that,” Mr. Petty replied quickly. “You see, Carmelita loves me.”

“In that case,” Malone said, “let’s say half a million.”

“No, no, Mr. Malone, you don’t understand. It isn’t money.”

“No money?”

“No, it’s just that I can’t marry Carmelita. You see, I’m already married. Thirty years this coming Wednesday, and I promised my wife—”

“I see,” Malone said, “and you want me to convey your regrets to the lady.” He was beginning to feel sorry for the little man. “In that case,” he continued, “it would be appropriate to offer something, don’t you think—by way of heart balm.”

“That’s what I wanted to see you about, Mr. Malone. I promised to fly with Carmelita to Monte Carlo—her mother lives in Monte Carlo, you know—but that was before Mr. Benson offered to help me out so I could put the money back in the safe—”

Malone sat up. “What money back in what safe?”

“Why the three thousand dollars I embezzled, Mr. Malone. Mr. Benson was very nice about it—he’s our general manager. Before he flies to Pittsburgh this afternoon he is leaving the money in the safe for me, and I’ll pay it back to him out of my salary. And tomorrow night I’m going over the books to set everything straight for the auditors on Monday morning. But it’s Carmelita I’m worried about. At first I thought I’d borrow a little more of the company money, just enough for the trip, and send the money back when I got a job. I understand they handle a lot of money in Monte Carlo and they might be able to use a man who’s good at figures.”

“I see,” Malone said. He wasn’t sure just yet what he could say.

“But I couldn’t do that now. Not with the auditors coming on Monday. And not after the way Mr. Benson treated me when I told him about the three thousand dollars. But I still want to do what’s right by Carmelita. So I thought, if you could see her for me and—give her this.”

Mr. Petty took a large plain envelope from his pocket and handed it across the desk to Malone.

Malone said, “Would you mind telling me what’s in it? I just want to be sure I’m not acting as accessory before—or after—a case of grand theft.”

“Oh it’s nothing like that,” Mr. Petty said, “Just something—personal. Carmelita will understand.”

And with this Mr. Petty rose and left, with such alacrity that it was not till he was gone that Malone realized he had neglected to leave Carmelita’s address or even her full name.

3.

The headline in the Monday morning Examiner was broad and black, but the story was brief.

Algernon Petty, bookkeeper for the Pittsburgh Products Company, was found shot to death last night in a spectacular payroll robbery at the company’s Chicago plant, 3545 Clybourne avenue. Emil Dockstedter, the nightwatchman on duty, reported the shooting to police who hurried to the scene. They found Petty in a pool of blood in front of the open safe. Officials said cash in the amount of $200,000 was missing from the safe. According to watchman Dockstedter, the money was delivered to the plant early Saturday to meet this morning’s monthly payroll, today being a bank holiday. George V. Benson, general manager, was reported flying back from Pittsburgh today, having left Saturday for a home office conference.

Dockstedter said that shortly after 10 P.M. he heard a shot fired and hurrying to the office found Petty dead on the floor. He fired after the fleeing bandit’s getaway car from the office window, but was unable to stop it, or make out
the license number of the car. Chief of Detectives Daniel Von Flanagan promptly ordered an all-out alarm for the fleeing bandits.

The victim had been in the employ of the company for 30 years. He is survived by his widow, Mrs. Sophia Petty, 2437 N. Damen Ave. Five years ago last Friday, Mrs. Petty was quoted as saying, Mr. Petty was awarded the company's 25-year medal for honest and faithful service.

Malone tossed the paper on his desk and sat down glumly, staring out of the window while he slowly removed the cellophane from his cigar and lit it.

Maggie read the story and looked across at Malone. He was still staring out the window, lost in thought.

"I know what you're thinking," Maggie said. "You feel you should have done something about it. But what could you have done? Anyway, it's too late now. As for Carmelita, Mrs. Sophia Petty wouldn't thank you for dragging her into the case. Besides, how do you know she wasn't in cahoots with the bandits? It wouldn't surprise me if she was off to Monte Carlo right now—with her share of the loot tucked away in her little overnight bag."

Malone took out the envelope the little bookkeeper had left with him. "I suppose, as Mr. Petty's lawyer, I have the right to open this now," he said. He tore open the envelope and emptied the contents on the desk. It was an airplane ticket to Monte Carlo. One person. One way. Made out to Carmelita Maguire, 1428 N. Jensen St., Chicago, Illinois.

4.

It was a six-flat tenement in the near north side slum district. A knock on the first door down the hall brought out an old Polish woman who told him in broken English that the Bednarskys in the third floor rear kept a boarder, a girl. Mrs. Bednarsky, after a few minutes of cautious evasion, admitted that her boarder's name was Maguire, that she worked behind the quick-lunch counter on the corner.

Carmelita Maguire, it turned out, was a brown-eyed blonde in her middle twenties, with a face that might have been copied out of a court painting of a Spanish princess, and traces of an Irish brogue in her speech. There were Maquires on his mother's side back in Ireland, Malone told her, and after that the going was easy. Evidently she hadn't read the morning papers, and Malone bided his time as he chatted with the girl over the ham and eggs she had set before him on the counter.

She did not remember her father, she confided. Her mother once told her she was a Spanish croupier in the games at Monte Carlo. He vanished one day and was never heard from again. "Mother still lives in Monaco," she told Malone. "I've always dreamed of going back some day."

With as much tact as he could manage, Malone broke the news to her and turned over the envelope Mr. Petty had left with him. After the first shock she sobbed quietly for a while, dabbing at her eyes with a corner of her apron. Then, "He was like a father to me," she said. "Yes, I knew he was married. He never deceived me about anything. He was a gentleman, he was. I always called him Mr. Petty. When we went places, weekends, he always took separate rooms, with adjoining bath, like nice people do. I don't know why I'm telling you all this, except that you were his friend. He went to you in his trouble. He didn't do anything wrong, did he, Mr. Malone? The police—they won't be coming to me, will they, asking me questions about—well, you know—?
"

Malone patted her hand gently. It was a soft, well-groomed hand for a girl who slung hash in a quick lunch joint. He could easily imagine her dressed in the latest Paris fashion, the center of attention as she swept into the Monte Carlo casino.

"Maybe not, if you answer my questions first," Malone told the girl.

From her answers Malone learned that she had met Mr. Petty about a year ago when she waited on him at a lunch room near the plant where she was working at the time. He had given her presents from time to time, inexpensive things, and money from time to time, which she said she had sent to her mother in Monaco. Apparently she knew nothing of his embezzlements. He had never introduced her to his friends. She said she had seen him last about two weeks ago and the account of her movements over the weekend sounded spontaneous and unforced. Unless, he
reminded himself, unless it should turn out that this vision of slightly tarnished innocence was serving him up something new in Irish blarney—with Spanish sauce. No, he decided. It was just one of those simple, unbelievable things that could happen only to the Mr. Pettys of this world. And simple young things like Carmelita Maguire, who go along trustingly with anything that comes along, only to be sideswiped by fate, like an unsuspecting pedestrian in the middle of Saturday night traffic.

"It's true, every word of it," Malone told Maggie when he got back to the office. "Even to the mother in Monte Carlo. Just the same I advised her not to leave for Monte Carlo just yet. If the police get wind of this they will want to question her, and it won't look so good if she's left the country in such a hurry."

The telephone rang and Maggie answered it. "It's Von Flanagan," she said.

Malone said, "Tell him I'm in conference."

Maggie relayed the message and handed the phone to Malone saying, "Tell him yourself. This is no fit language for a lady's ears."

Malone took the receiver and held it twelve inches from his ear till the bellowing stopped. "Malone, Malone, are you there?" the voice resumed, in more moderate volume.

"Yes, I'm here," Malone replied. "Where are you, in Indo China? I can't hear you very well."

"You can hear me all right," the Chief of Homicide replied. "What I want to know is, what have you got to do with this payroll robbery and murder? We found your name and address on the victim's body."

Malone said, "Maybe he was planning to give me as a character witness to St. Peter at the pearly gates."

"That must be it," Von Flanagan came back, in a voice that had more edge and less volume to it. "Because right here in his little book—entry made last Saturday—John J. Malone, retainer, twenty dollars. Are you going in for cut rates now?"

"Got to meet the amateur competition," Malone said. "Anyway, it looks as if my client has met with foul play. I suppose you know by this time who his assailants are."

"Don't give me that, Malone. What I want to know is, what was Algernon Petty doing in your office the day before he was murdered?"

Malone said, "He wasn't consulting me about getting himself murdered, if that's what you're thinking. The man you should be questioning is George V. Benson."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"I don't know," Malone said, "but I've got a hunch."

"Benson was in Pittsburgh when the job was pulled." Von Flanagan said. "He's due back in less than an hour, and if you've got any evidence involving him in the crime bring it to my office and confront him with it. And it better be good, or you'll need that twenty buck retainer to buy yourself cigarettes in the County Jail. Ever hear of false arrest, accessory before the fact, giving misleading information, failure to report——"

Malone hung up the receiver and jumping up reached for his hat.

"What's the hurry?" Maggie called out after him.

"I've got to go see a lawyer," Malone said, and bolted, with surprising celerity, out the door.

5.

"To the Municipal Airport," Malone told the cab driver, "and never mind the red lights. I've got friends at City Hall."
"I've heard that one before," the cabby shot back over his shoulder. "What's the big rush?"

Malone said, "The accessorius post mortem has just been caught in flagrante delicto."

"Happens all the time," the cabby said, and settled back into moody silence the rest of the way.

At the airport Malone went straight to the ticket window. "I've got to fly to Pittsburgh Saturday afternoon and be back here in time for an important homicide last night," he told the clerk. "Can I make it?"

The clerk blinked, started writing up a ticket, blinked again and, "You mean Saturday night out of Pittsburgh," he said, "There is an extra plane back to Chicago on Saturday nights, arriving here Sunday morning at—"

"Did you say Sunday morning?"

"Yes sir, Sunday. But that won't leave you much time in Pittsburgh. I wouldn't advise it, sir—"

Malone said, "Thank you, I was only inquiring."

At the information desk he was told that the plane from Pittsburgh was preparing to touch down, and put in a page call for George V. Benson.

Malone waited till Benson had shaken off reporters with a curt "No comment," and presented his card. "The matter of a loan of three thousand dollars you made my client, Mr. Algernon Petty, last Saturday," he explained.

Benson had stuck the card in his pocket with the air of a man who has other business on his mind and is not to be detained. Now he took it out again and read aloud, "John J. Malone. Not the John J. Malone," he said.

"Thank you," Malone said. "I thought you might wish to discuss this little transaction before you talk to the police."

"It was simply a matter of helping out an old employee in a jam," Benson told Malone over a highball in the airport bar a few minutes later. "Besides, it would have been bad publicity for the company. I had no idea it would lead to anything—he seemed like such a harmless sort. Must have been in a lot deeper than he let on, to try anything like this."

"What do you mean?" Malone said.

Benson said, "Surely, Mr. Malone, you don't think Petty could have thought up anything like this by himself. He must have had confederates."

"Then why did he come to you with his story about the embezzlements?"

"Oh, so you know about that too?" For the first time Benson looked disturbed. "What else did he tell you?"

"He said you promised to leave the three thousand for him in the safe Saturday afternoon. Of course you knew the payroll cash was in the safe. Didn't you think it was a bit of a risk to leave a man like Petty alone with two hundred thousand dollars when he had just confessed to embezzling company funds?"

Benson looked down at his glass. "I can see now how that might be misconstrued," he said. "Of course you understand I had no intention of accusing Mr. Petty of anything. It was just that I couldn't understand—" He took out his wallet and handed Malone the confession the little bookkeeper had signed. "Here, you keep this," he said. "Or better yet, destroy it. There is also Mrs. Petty to consider. And the trouble he was having—with women, I mean. I suppose he told you about that too? Imagine, women! A man like Petty. I wouldn't want to have it on my conscience—"

"That's very generous of you, Mr. Benson," Malone said. He put the signed confession in his pocket.

"I would destroy that if I were you," Benson said. "I wouldn't want anything to come out that might be misinterpreted—can I give you a lift, Mr. Malone?"
In the cab on the way to police headquarters Benson was still nervous and disturbed. “I dread all this fuss—reporters, police—I suppose I'll have to testify at the inquest. It would be a great relief to me if I had a good lawyer—” He looked speculatively at Malone.

The little lawyer nodded. “Come and see me. Any time.” At police headquarters he took leave of Benson, explaining it was only a short walk to his office. “I might begin by giving you one piece of legal advice,” he said on parting. “If Von Flanagan should ask you why you took the midnight plane back from Pittsburgh Saturday and what you were doing in Chicago Sunday night, don’t tell him a thing. Remember nobody is compelled to testify against himself.”

Without turning to look back Malone hurried to the corner and boarded a streetcar to the office. No point in running up cab fares, he told himself. Not on a twenty-buck retainer.

Back at the office Malone handed Maggie the signed confession, saying, “Put this in my safe deposit box first thing tomorrow morning when you make the bank deposit. Did I have any phone calls?”

Maggie gave him a straight look. “What bank deposit? And whom did you expect a call from?”

"There might be a bank deposit, and I'm expecting a call from George Benson. I just left him at police headquarters. He seems to think he'll be needing my professional services."

"Don't tell me it was Benson!”

Malone said, “I'm not ready to say it was anybody—yet. But it could have been Benson. Let's take a trial balance.” He took out a fresh cigar and lighted it carefully before continuing. “All right, motive: Two hundred thousand dollars is enough motive for anybody, anytime. Opportunity: He could have flown to Pittsburgh Saturday afternoon, checked in at a hotel and seen or called somebody from the home office, and caught the night plane back to Chicago with plenty of time to kill Petty and return to Pittsburgh on the night plane, and deposit the payroll money in an airfield locker. Meanwhile the police would be searching for the bandit killers, and—no bandits. Because ... “ Malone watched a funnel of cigar smoke ascend slowly to the ceiling, “because the safest crime to commit is one in which the only obvious suspect is the one everybody is searching for and nobody can find—because he doesn't exist.”

"Perfect,” Maggie said. “Unless somebody saw him come back. Unless somebody noticed that he hadn't spent the night in his hotel room, or saw him getting off the plane there in the morning, or returning to his hotel room. And what about the murder weapon? And the night watchman?”

"No crime is that perfect,” Malone said. “Besides, Benson may save everybody a lot of trouble yet by cracking up and coming clean with the whole story. He was pretty scared when I left him. Yes, I have an idea we'll be seeing Mr. Benson soon.”

That evening the papers carried the news that all reports of the fleeing bandits had proved false alarms, that auditors had failed to find any irregularities in the slain bookkeeper's accounts, and that, according to Captain Von Flanagan, the department had undisclosed information on the identity of the payroll mob and was preparing to stage a series of lightning arrests. There was also a statement by George V. Benson to the effect that no effort or expense would be spared by his firm to bring the murderers to justice.

It was nearly midnight when the telephone in Malone's apartment rang. It was George Benson. His voice was low but urgent. “I've got to see you right away. Alone. I'll be right over.” In less than fifteen minutes he was at the door, a shaken, almost incoherent, man.

"I need your help, Malone. You'll have to believe me. I had nothing to do with the robbery or the murder. I was only trying to help Petty. But what do you suppose happened tonight? Eric Dockstedter came to my home. He's our night watchman, you know. For the longest time he kept talking, beating around the bush, and then it dawned on me what he was trying to say. He suspects me of having committed the robbery and the murder! Didn't want to make any trouble for me, he said, loyalty and all that, to the firm, to me personally, but he had a sick wife, a son-in-law that was in some kind of jam, he wasn't in too good health himself and was thinking of retiring anyway, and all that kind
of talk. Trying to shake me down. Trying to blackmail me!"

"What did you say?"

"What could I say? I denied it, of course. I couldn't fire him. He might go to the police anyway. I stalled. Told him I'd have to think it over. There must be some way to stop him, Malone. But quietly, without any publicity. There'll be expenses, of course. I'm not a rich man, Malone, but a thing like this—will a thousand take care of it? The initial expense, I mean."

Malone tried not to look at the crisp hundred dollar bills on the coffee table. "As your lawyer—and I haven't said I'll take the case yet—I would have to ask you a few questions first, Mr. Benson," Malone said. "Why did you fly back from Pittsburgh Saturday night, and what were you doing in Chicago between Sunday morning and Sunday night when you flew back to Pittsburgh?"

"How did you know—" Benson began, and stopped himself abruptly. "Who says I was here Sunday? Did anybody see me?"

"I was only guessing," Malone admitted. "Just a shot in the dark, but it seems to have rung a bell. Come now, Benson, I'll have to have the whole story—straight—if I'm going to take your case. You may have to explain it to the police later, anyway."

"I suppose so," Benson replied dejectedly. "Although there's nothing to it, really. Nothing that has any bearing on the case. It—it's something personal."

Malone said, "I see. The blonde alibi. You'll have to think of something more original, Mr. Benson."

"I'd hoped I could keep her out of this," Benson said, shaking his head sadly, "But I suppose you'll have to check on it. I'll need time, though, to sort of prepare her for it."

Malone shook his head. He handed Benson the telephone. "Now," he said. "Just say I've got to see her right away. Alone. And don't try coaching the witness."

Benson did as he was bidden, then drove Malone to the rendezvous. As he pulled up before the apartment hotel he turned to Malone. "This is going to be a delicate business," he said. "I can trust you, of course."

"You can trust a lawyer with anything," Malone said, "and don't mention a word of this to your wife."

7.

The blonde alibi proved to be a blonde all right, and everything else a man could wish in the way of an alibi. Serena Gates was neither surprised nor shocked.

"I've been expecting something like this ever since it happened," she told Malone right away. "I'm not the kind of a girl you think I am, Mr. Malone. Things are not really as bad as they look."

Malone looked again and decided things didn't look bad at all. In fact, things were every bit as good as they looked, even in the dim half light that concealed as much as it revealed of the shapely figure.

"You'll have to excuse my informal attire," Serena said, drawing a wisp of the filmy negligee over her shoulder. "You see, I had already gone to bed. It's about yesterday you want to question me, isn't it? Can I fix you something to drink?"

After the fourth highball and what Malone told himself was a very satisfactory investigation of the facts, he came away with the conviction that Benson's alibi was just a trifle short of what he needed to eliminate him as a suspect. According to Serena Gates he had left her apartment shortly after eight o'clock in the evening driving a rented car, as he usually did on his visits. The crime was committed at ten. This would have left him plenty of time to drive to the plant, return the rented car and take a cab to the airport. Serena might have been lying about the time, but if she was it did not promise well for Benson if he had no better alibi than she was willing to give him. Besides, she seemed to
be prepared to take an entirely fresh view of her amatory loyalties. The little lawyer made a mental note to look further into this aspect of the case.

When he got down to the office at noon he told Maggie about the events of the night before. Maggie was unimpressed. “Von Flanagan has been telephoning like mad all morning,” she told him. The words were hardly out of her mouth when the phone rang. It was an entirely changed Von Flanagan.

"We're up against a blank wall, Malone. You've got to help me out. We've run down every suspicious car report, and no dice. I've never seen anything like it. No fingerprints, no murder weapon, no suspects."

Malone said, “Have you questioned the night watchman?"

"Yesterday and again this morning. Same thing. He heard a shot, found the body, and fired after the getaway car. Ballistics supports the guy's story. The bullet that killed Petty wasn't from his gun. I know your suspect is Benson but you're crazy. We've checked his alibi. He was in Pittsburgh all right."

Malone said, “Maybe you're barking up the wrong alibi. And maybe there weren't any bandits."

"Malone, Malone, you're holding out on me.” The tone was something between a plea and a threat. “If Petty told you anything about Benson, it's your duty—besides I'm your friend, and if you make one false move, Malone, so help me—"

"I'll be ready to tell you all I know in a few hours,” Malone said. “Meanwhile, put a tail on Benson. We may need him before the night is over.” He hung up.

"Malone,” Maggie said, “I've seen you stick your neck out before, but this time you've really done it. How can you prove Benson killed Petty and stole the money? Motive? Sure. And now, with this blonde in the picture, double sure. Opportunity? Swell. He could have done it in the two hours between eight and ten. He might have done it, he could have done it, but did he do it? And where are your witnesses? Where is the murder weapon? And where is the money? I suppose you think Benson is going to make a full confession, produce the gun, and turn over the money, just to get you out of a mess."

"Maggie,” Malone said, “I think I need a drink."

"No use looking in the Emergency file,” Maggie said, “You killed that bottle yesterday."

The telephone rang. It was Benson.

"Dockstedter just called me. Gave me till noon tomorrow. He wants fifty thousand dollars. You've got to do something, Malone.” He paused. “I talked to Serena on the phone this morning. She's acting kind of strange. What did she tell you, Malone?"

Malone said, “You haven't got a thing to worry about. A clean conscience is a man's best defense. Sit tight and don't do a thing till you hear from me. And don't go near Serena again till I give you the all clear. The police might be shadowing you.” He hung up. “What was I saying, Maggie?"

"About money,” Maggie said. “Why don't you use some of that thousand Benson gave you?"

Malone was indignant. “That money goes right back to Benson the minute I put the finger on him. You forget I've got a client. Algernon Petty.”

8.

It was a perplexed and dejected John J. Malone who walked into Joe the Angel's City Hall her early that evening.

"Joe,” Malone said, “have I got any credit left around here?"

"Liquor, yes. Money, no,” Joe the Angel said. “What's the matter now, Malone? The client he no pay?"
"The client he pay," Malone said. "Twenty bucks. Then he get shot, and two hundred thousand dollars missing. Make it a gin and beer."

"I read about it in paper," Joe the Angel said. "Too bad. Don't worry, Malone, you find the bandits. Yes?"

"I find the bandits no," Malone said. "Joe, I need flowers."

"Ah, for the funeral. Sure, Malone."

"Not for the funeral, Joe. For a lady."

"Ah, for a lady. Same thing. I mean, I call my brother-in-law, the one owns funeral parlor, and he send over flowers left over from funeral. What's address?"

Malone gave him Serena Gates' address, decided to call her up, and then changed his mind. Better surprise her after the flowers are delivered. "Tell him to put in a card saying 'Flowers to the fair,' and sign my name to it," Malone called over to Joe the Angel who was already on the telephone.

Over a second gin and beer Malone unburdened his heart. "Imagine, Joe. I've got the case as good as solved. The suspect had the motive. He had the opportunity. His alibi is two hours short and the lady in the case is on my side. All I need is the evidence—the murder gun, the money, or at least a witness."

Joe the Angel said, "The lady, maybe she help you?"

"I don't know," Malone said. "She admits he was in her apartment till eight. How would she know what he was doing between eight and ten," he paused, "unless she followed him," he paused again, "unless—" He set the beer down on the bar. "Give me a rye, quick, Joe. Make it a double rye. I've got to think."

He downed the double shot. "I've got it, Joe," he beamed. "I think I've got it. If Benson is two hours short on his alibi, so is Serena Gates. I've got to go and see the lady again. How about a ten-spot, on the cuff?"

"For a lady, that's different," Joe the Angel said, and handed over the ten.

"Thanks," Malone said, "and can I borrow your gun?"

With a look of utter confusion Joe the Angel handed Malone the gun. "First it is flowers. Now it is a gun," he muttered, shrugging his shoulders. Malone was already on his way out the door.

9.

This time Serena Gates was both surprised and shocked at Malone's unexpected visit. It took a foot in the door and an ungentlemanly heave of the shoulder to override the lady's remonstrances. Serena was furious.

"What is the meaning of this? Malone, you must be crazy."

"Call it the impatience of youth," Malone said.

He looked around the living room. It had every appearance of a hastily planned departure, stripped of every personal belonging. He noted that his flowers to the fair had been delivered, and deposited in the waste basket. Three suit cases stood ready near the door. One of them particularly struck his eye. It seemed singularly out of place, large, metal-bound and quite unladylike.

"I was just planning to leave," Serena explained nervously.

"So I see," Malone said. "Can I help you with your baggage? This looks like the heavy one."

With his left hand he reached down for the big metal-bound suitcase, while his right hand moved to his hip pocket. The lady was faster on the draw but slower on the rebound. With a swift lashing motion of his right arm Malone slapped the gun out of her hand. In the clawing, kicking, catch-as-catch-can wrestling match that followed Malone
had no reason to revise his previous appraisal of Serena's physical charms, but he realized how much he had underestimated her muscular development. It took most of what he had once learned from Dr. Butch ("The Killer") Hayakawa about the gentle art of jujitsu to persuade the lady to listen to reason.

"I guess you could have handled that baggage yourself, after all," he said, still breathing hard. Keeping Serena covered with his own gun he picked hers up off the floor and stuck it in his coat pocket. "If it's Benson you're waiting for, you can just take it easy," he told her. "He'll be along in due time—with the police right behind him. But maybe it isn't Benson. If it were, you would have given him a better alibi. Or were you planning to double-cross him and let him take the rap while you made a fast getaway?"

Serena was silent, glaring at him with the pent-up fury of a cat waiting its opportunity to spring again.

Malone said, "No, I guess it wasn't Benson, after all. Between eight and ten Sunday night you had as much opportunity to commit the crime as he had. You forgot that when you tried to short him on his alibi. All right, who was it? You didn't handle this job alone, did you, or am I underestimating you again?"

"Malone," she said, "there's two hundred thousand dollars in that suit case. Don't be a fool. There's still time if you and I—"

"A generous thought," Malone said, "and a flattering one."

"Make up your mind, Malone. They'll be here any minute—"

"So there were others," Malone said. "And now you're ready to double-cross them too, if I'll split with you." He reached for the telephone. "Get me Captain Daniel Von Flanagan at police headquarters," he told the hotel operator.

Serena screamed, "Malone, don't be a fool! Malone—!"

"Get over here right away," Malone told Von Flanagan, after explaining the situation to him briefly. "And bring Benson with you."

Von Flanagan and his squad had barely arrived on the scene and staked out to arrest the bandits when they arrived. Malone heard a knock on the door and then the shooting started. When it was over, two subdued bandits, one of them slightly wounded, were brought in. At sight of Serena Gates one of them shouted "Stool pigeon! Double-crosser!" and lunged toward her, but Von Flanagan's cops restrained him.

"There's the payroll haul," Malone said to Von Flanagan, "and here's the lady's gun."

"That makes three guns," Von Flanagan remarked. "One of them should tell us who fired the shot that killed Petty. Nice work, Malone."

"I was just doing my duty to my client, Mr. Algernon Petty," Malone replied. "That's what he retained me for."

When he was finally alone in the apartment with Benson Malone said, "What are you going to do about the night watchman? Fire him, or lend him money to get his son-in-law out of a jam? And, speaking of money, here is your thousand-dollar retainer. I'm sorry, I guess I had you figured wrong all the time."

"You'd better keep it," Benson said, "I'm going to need a lawyer to defend me—in a divorce suit."

"At your service," Malone said. "Remember I never lost a client yet."

He bent down and picked the flowers out of the waste basket. The card was still attached to them: "Flowers to the Fair, From John J. Malone."

"I know a young lady who will appreciate these," Malone said, "Her mother lives in Monte Carlo."
I want to get this written down on paper fast, while there's still some Sneaky Pete in the bottle, just in case my hand gets shaky and I need it. Not that I'm stooling, understand. When you're a wino on Skid Row you don't holler copper. But this is different from stealing the shoes off a mission stiff or jack-rolling a lush. This is murder.

I want to have this all written down on paper with a date on it and somebody to witness it, then I'm going to seal it up in an envelope and leave it with a character I can trust. Maybe a Holy Joe at the Sally Ann—the Salvation Army—or the bartender at Grogan's gin mill on the Bowery. Just in case the cops get to smelling around with their big noses, understand. Because this is the first time that I was ever mixed up in a murder and I got to protect myself. I'm not really mixed up in it, I guess, but just kind of a witness. And I'm not even sure it's murder.

Don't start laughing and thinking I'm going off into the rams or counting the lavender leopards on the ceiling just because I'm a wino. This happened. It happened just today. And by now maybe they got the old doll that was chilled in the top drawer of the ice box at the morgue on East Twenty-ninth Street.

I'll take another snort of the sweet wine I got right here beside me in the cubbyhole at the Castle Rooms I just paid the man six bits to occupy until tomorrow morning. Then I'll begin at the beginning. There, that's better. Stuff warms up your insides, know what I mean?

I woke up in this same flophouse this morning. Only I didn't wake up in a six-bit private room. I woke up in what they call the dormitory where a bed costs thirty-five cents. I didn't wake up until nine o'clock when they come around to fumigate the place. They run you out of here every day at nine so they can fumigate and you can't get back in until four in the afternoon.

I felt awful, worse than I ever did feel before, but when the man started hollering to hit the deck I did all the usual things mechanically before I tried to get up. I felt for the Army shoes with the waterproof soles and they were tied around my neck like usual. I reached down inside the old gray sweatshirt and the little tobacco pouch where I keep what's left from the stakes I make by bracing guys was there, pinned to me, but it was empty. That didn't surprise me because I knew I'd spent my last cent on a pint of Sneaky to get up on. I felt my leg. I always tied the morning pint to my leg, inside my trousers, in a special way I had invented. I hadn't even opened the bottle the night before, but it wasn't there. Some mother-lover had split my trousers leg with a razor blade and got the pint while I was sleeping off my binge.

I damn near blew my top right there. I had the green-paint horrors and I didn't have a cent and the brand new full pint that would have saved my life was poured down some mother-lover's gullet. I tried to get out of bed and I could hardly stand on my own two feet, I was shaking so. I didn't know what the hell to do. I'd be lucky to make the street without a shot the way I felt, and in order to brace enough of a stake for a drink I'd have to get off the Bowery. You can't bum from bums. Maybe I'd have to walk up Fourth Street all the way to Washington Square and I couldn't ever make it without a drink.

I staggered into the lavatory and splashed some water on myself and looked around at the empties on the floor, hoping maybe some guy might have left even a few drops in a bottle. I'd been on Skid Row long enough to know better. Somehow or other I managed to get down the steps and out into the street. I kind of leaned against buildings until I was outside Grogan's Palace Bar about a block away. I'd been drinking there the night before. It's funny how they give Skid Row pads and wino traps such high-faluting names. The Castle and the Palace, for instance. And just a little further on there's a flea flop called the Berkshire Arms. The Bowery businessmen have got a funny kind of humor.

All around me were little groups of guys pooling the change they'd saved from their bracing operations of the day before so they could make a crock. There's two kinds of winos on the Bowery. One kind tries to hold on to enough change overnight so they can get in a morning pool that's trying to make a crock to pass around. The other kind buys their pint or fifth the night before and tries to hang on to it till morning. I'm the second kind. I got something wrong with my throat and I can't take big swallows. Usually you only get one swallow at a crock when you're in a pool, so I always get gypped. Also, some of these pools buy Sweet Lucy, which is port, and I go for Sneaky Pete, which is
sherry or muscatel. Not that it makes much difference. When I feel like I felt that morning, I'll drink anything, including kerosene.

I shuffled into the Palace and I walked right into murder, although I didn't know it then and I was too fogged to think about murder or anything else, anyway. I said to the bartender, “Suds, some mother-loving bastard ripped my jeans and stole my life insurance, a whole pint of it. Suds, I got the heaves and jerks and I'm going off into the rams if I don't get one quick. You give me just one big-boy on the cuff, Suds, and I'll be in shape to brace a stake and pay you inside half an hour. I spent a lot in here last night. Almost three bucks, Suds.”

Suds just laughed like that was funny. He said, “You been around long enough to know better than ask for a cuff in Grogan's trap. Grogan wouldn't cuff his sweet old drunken grandmother. Fall down in the gutter and drool a little and maybe Kerrigan, the cop, will take you up to Bellevue. They got some stuff there called paraldehyde makes your eyeballs pop like the buttons on a fat man's vest.”

I was really shaking now and the sweat was rolling off me so hard it bounced on the bar. A guy at the bar was looking at me. He was just another Skid Row grifter, dirty as I was, needing a shave. But he had a kind of air about him like he’d seen better days. He had a big, fat purple goblet of vino in front of him that made my tongue hang out a foot, and he had a dog. It was the damned ugliest dog I ever saw in all my life. A kind of mongrel bull, I guess. It was so old it could hardly walk. It had nasty-looking sores and a swelling in its belly like a tumor. Its eyes were two big milky moonstones. Cataracts. The old dog was blind.

The dog’s owner had evidently been belting himself with the Pete for quite a spell because he was beginning to glow like a wino does when the stuff gets in his bloodstream. His cheeks were pink in his dirty-gray face. He kind of smiled at me and showed a set of jagged teeth stained purple-brown by wine. He waved a fan of dirty fingers at me and said to Suds, “This man is sick. I was a doctor once and I know. Alcohol is a strange element. It’s the only poison that serves as its own antidote.”

Suds said, “So what you want that I should do? Give every sick creep that crawls through the door a shot of bonded bourbon on the house?”

The man put money on the bar. He gulped the whole goblet of wine, then he said, “Refill my glass. Give our friend a blockbuster on me. He requires strong medicine.”

I almost started to laugh and cry at the same time. If you'd given me a choice between a million cash or the most beautiful broad in the world with all her clothes except her stockings off or a blockbuster, right then, I'd have taken the blockbuster. A blockbuster is a beer goblet full of sherry with a shot of cheap rye poured right into it. If that don't fix you up, it's time for the embalming needle.

The guy who saved my life was a wino himself and he was smart enough not to talk any more until I got the blockbuster down. It took a little while because like I say I got something wrong with my throat and I got to kind of sip, but I held that goblet in two hands and I kept on sipping and didn't put it down till it was empty. I could feel the stuff flowing through me nice and warm every inch of the way. Down the hatch, into the lungs, out into the arms and hands, into the belly and right down to the groin and the legs and the numb feet. In thirty seconds by the clock my hands that had been fluttering like the tassels on a strip-dancer's brassiere were steady.

The man tugged at his old dog and dragged him up the bar toward me. The blind dog walked stiff like a zombie in one of those horror films they show at the all-night picture houses.

"Feel better?" the man asked.

I nodded. “Mister,” I said, “you ought to get the medal they hand out for lifesaving.”

He chuckled, or kind of cackled rather. He waved his dirty paw at the bartender, put money on the bar, said, “A bird can't fly on one wing. What's your name, son?”

"Jack," I told him. Nobody ever gives their right name on Skid Row and that was what they called me when they called me anything. As Suds filled up the glasses, I said, “You must have just come into an inheritance.”
"Not yet," he said, "but I'm about to do so. Today, I think. A friend of mine is very ill. High blood-pressure. Heart
disease. Partial paralysis. And it's all complicated by old age and chronic alcoholism. I've been watching her closely.
I'm a doctor, you know, even though they took my license. The slightest shock will carry her off. I don't expect her
to last the day." He gulped at his wine and looked happy.

A thousand guys you meet on Skid Row expect to inherit a fortune any given minute. I didn't take this character
seriously. But I was hurting and he was buying, so I was willing to let him talk.

"She leaving you her money?" I asked.

He thought it over. "Well, not exactly," he said. "She hasn't any money. I've kept her alive for a long while now. I'm
a doctor, even if they took my license. I let people impose on me, you see. So now I live on city charity and an
occasional handout from my brother. I never could refuse poor, suffering people who wanted prescriptions for
sedatives—goof balls, you know. One girl killed herself with an overdose. And another girl talked me into
performing an illegal operation. I almost went to jail. I was too softhearted to practice medicine. We may as well
have another one. I just cashed my relief check. And if the old lady dies today I'll have plenty."

Suds filled them up. The man said, "You can call me Doc, Jack. Doc Trevor, that's my name. This old woman's
name is Marge. Marge Lorraine. It was a famous name once, but you wouldn't remember, you're too young. She was
an actress. Booze and age and sickness got her. When she was still young enough she became a street-walker to get
her booze. Then she hit Skid Row and the lousy bums would make her dance and kick her heels up so they could
laugh at her. That's the only way she could get booze. And she was old then, Jack. Old enough to be a grandmother.
To think that she'd been a fine actress once, with her name up there in lights."

He couldn't stand the thought of it and drank down the wine in his goblet.

"I used to see her in the joints, kicking her heels up for the stinking bums so she could get a drink to stop the hurting.
I couldn't stand it. She was old enough to be my mother. I remembered how I used to worship her up there behind
the footlights when I was a kid. One night I took her home with me to the coldwater flat I've got in a tenement on
Hester Street. She's been there ever since, a couple of years now. I was interested in her complication of diseases. It's
a miracle she's alive at all. I don't have money for the drugs she needs, but a little booze, a little food, what
medicines I can buy, they've kept her alive. The main thing that's kept her alive, though, is this old dog here. His
name is Pasteur. I found him when he was a pup. He was homeless, like the old woman was, so I took him to my
flat. That was seventeen years ago. Most dogs don't live seventeen years. Pasteur's like the old woman. Old and sick
and useless. Everything the matter with him but he keeps on living somehow. He gives the old woman courage. She
figures so long as the dog can live, the shape he's in, she can live, too."

He said, "It's what they call 'Identification' in psychology. She identifies herself with the dog, you see. You
interested in psychology, Jack?"

"I used to be," I told him. "I used to be interested in lots of things. Right now I'm only interested in another drink."

He waved his dirty hand and got the beakers refilled again. "Psychology," he said. "If the booze or life or something
hadn't got me a long time ago, I'd do a paper about the old woman and the dog for the medical society magazine.
When Pasteur feels good and gets the idea he's a pup again and frisks a little, the old woman feels good, too. When
he's sick and moping and whining, she's that way. High blood-pressure affects a person's eyesight. She isn't blind
yet, but she can't see too well. Her eyes started going about the time the dog developed cataracts."

"It's too bad he's blind like that, poor old dog," I said.

"He doesn't mind too much," the doc replied. "Dogs don't go much by their eyes anyway. It's the nose with them.
The nose and ears. Pasteur can still do tricks, even. Watch him." He snapped his fingers. "Sit!" he said. "Sit up,
Pasteur!"

The old dog scrambled to his feet and tried to balance himself on his rump and you could tell it hurt him like hell. It
was like an old man with rheumatism trying to do a handspring. The doc kept barking, "Sit! Sit up!" and he seemed
to be enjoying himself because this old dog was the only thing on earth would take orders from him. The dog finally
managed to sit up on his rump, kind of swaying. “Good boy,” said the doc. “Pasteur knows lots of tricks. The old woman claps her hands when she sees him do them. He’s just learned a brand new trick. We're going to show the old woman when we get back, aren't we, Pasteur?”

"Please don’t make him do any more tricks for me,” I said. “He's too old for tricks. It hurts him, sitting up like that.”

"You don't understand the psychology of the old,” the doc answered. “Pasteur loves doing tricks. It makes him feel important. When the old cease to feel important, they know they're useless, and that's when they start to die.”

I didn't want him to make the old dog do any more tricks, so I tried to change the subject. I said, “If this old lady hasn't got any money, how you going to inherit any money when she dies?”

"Insurance,” said the doc. “When I got her things from the place they'd put her out of before she moved in with me, I found an old insurance policy. It was made out to her daughter, the only policy she had that hadn't lapsed. The daughter walked out when Marge got to be a lush and Marge has never heard from her. Doesn't even know if she's alive. But one way or another, she'd kept the payments up right to the year before. It was an annual premium and it was due again. I got her to sign some papers from the insurance company making me the beneficiary and I've been paying the premium ever since.”

"Is it for a lot of money?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “Not much, or I couldn't pay the premium on it. But it's a lot for guys like you and me. Two grand.”

"What makes you think she's going to die today?” I asked.

He was pretty drunk. He winked at me. “I’m a doctor,” he said. “I know. I know the signs.” Then he kind of bit his lips with his wine-stained teeth and said, “There's a friend of mine with the city relief agency. He always tips me off when investigators are coming around. They'd cut me off the relief rolls if they knew I had Marge up there with me. You're not allowed to keep another person in the place they rent for you. Up to now I've always got her out in time when the investigator was paying me a call. Parked her in a gin mill and hid what rags she's got and got rid of all the empties. But now she's going blind and almost paralyzed, I can't get her down the steps. And I've been tipped off the investigator is coming around tomorrow. I can't lose that relief.” He drew himself up straight, said, “I'm too much of a gentleman to brace men on the street for my flop and booze money.”

The blockbusters he'd bought had really busted inside me now and made me kind of cocky. Besides, it made me sore, him throwing off like that on guys who brace marks on the street. After all, he was just another wino himself. I should have strung him along, of course, since he was buying and I was needing. But I said, “Look here, Doc, you trying to tell me you're going to bump this old doll today so you can collect her insurance money and this investigator won't find her in your pad?”

"That's fantastic,” he replied. “I couldn't harm a hair of her poor old head. Why, I'm the one who's kept her alive as long as this. But I'm a doctor and I know she's dying, and since she's dying I might as well see the undertaker gets her out before the relief investigator arrives.”

He looked me full in the face. “That's only common sense,” he said. “And I'll give her a nice funeral on the insurance money, too.”

I was still talking against my own best interests, my best interests being for him to keep hanging around and buying me blockbusters. But I was getting tight and I said, “If you think she's dying why aren't you up there with her?”

He said, very serious, “You've got a point. A telling point. Fact is, I don't want to be alone with her when she dies, Jack. I'm a drunk. I might get the horrors. You could do me a favor, Jack.”

Uh-uh, I thought, here it comes. I'm old enough to know guys don't buy you three blockbusters in a row without expecting something. Usually with guys like me who are big and young and kind of rough, it's the fags slumming on Skid Row who make the propositions. Sometimes they only want you to come up to their fancy Park Avenue apartments and beat the holy hell out of them. That's a funny kind of kick, you ask me. But this guy wasn't gay and
he wasn't any slummer. He was a wino who belonged right where he was—on the Bowery.

He was saying, “I'd appreciate it a lot if you'd come up with me, Jack. We can pick up some bottles of wine on the way. Enough to last all day. I'd like you to be there when she dies, just so I could have a little company. A man needs a friend at a time like that.”

It's funny the things an alky will do to get the stuff. I knew damned well he was framing me somehow and I thought he might be planning murder, but all I was thinking about was those bottles of wine he was going to buy.

I said, “Well, maybe if I could have another blockbuster first. It's quite a walk.”

"Sure," said the doc. “Put two ryes in my friend's sherry this time, bartender.”

The Bowery is used to sights, but the procession we made on our way to Hester Street was one that attracted attention. The blind old dog could hardly walk at all and he moved along in his zombie fashion putting one stiff leg out in front of the other, his nose scraping the sidewalk like a bloodhound on the scent. The hangover and four blockbusters, including a double, had made my own legs wobbly. And the doc was glaze-eyed drunk and stared straight ahead like he was hypnotized. We stopped at a liquor store and bought half a gallon jug of wine plus an extra fifth, just in case the old lady didn't die right away and we might need it. There were several flights of steps to climb in doc's tenement, but we didn't mind 'em too much because we stopped on each landing and had ourselves a snort. I carried the jugs and the doc carried the blind and crippled old dog upstairs.

The doc's flat was a railroad, three tiny rooms in a row. The first one was the kitchen with an oil stove and a sink and an old fashioned ice box and a table and some chairs in it. The second was the doc's bedroom. The door to the third was closed. The place was pretty bare and was furnished with stuff from junk shops, but the doc had kept it neat and clean. I guess it was his hospital training. Most drunks like doc are pretty messy.

The doc told me to sit down in the kitchen. He left the jug and the dog with me. Then he tiptoed to the old lady's room, the closed one, and opened the door. He came back in a minute or two. He put a finger to his mouth and said, “She's asleep now.” But he didn't close her door.

We sat in the kitchen drinking wine and talking about this and that and once or twice I nodded off and put my arms on the kitchen table and slept maybe an hour or more. Every time I woke up the doc was there. He was one of those winos that seems to drink himself sober. Each time he'd tell me the old doll was still sleeping. The old dog would be sleeping, too, snoring loud.

Once I woke up and saw there was hardly a drink left in the half-gallon jug and that we'd have to start on the fifth if the old lady didn't die pretty soon. I figured the vino wasn't lasting as long as the doc had thought it would till I looked out the window and saw it was dark. We'd got to the flat before noon. Now it was night already. A drunk sure loses track of time, sleeping and waking up like I'd been doing.

The doc looked worried. He said, “It's getting late and the investigator comes tomorrow. I've got to get old Marge out of here.”

I was rumdumb and stary-eyed and the nasty part of sitting there and drinking and waiting for a sick old woman to die didn't mean a thing to me. I was only worried if the wine would last. I said, “You mean she's already dead and the undertaker hasn't come to get her?”

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “She hasn't died. Not yet, she hasn't.”

Then he went over and shook the old blind dog named Pasteur and woke him up. He said sharply, “Come on, Pasteur. We're going to show old Marge the new trick that you've learned.”

Like I say, I was rumdumb and stary-eyed and my brain was numb from the blockbusters and the Pete and I just sat there grinning like a halfwit, not realizing what the hell he was up to.

"Play dead, Pasteur! Play dead!” he said.
The poor old dog got down on his side and after a few painful tries he rolled over on his back and lay there with his stiff legs stuck up in the air and the milky cataracts over his eyes glowing in the ceiling light. The doc had told me all about the old doll identifying herself with the dog, but I was so drunk, I'd forgotten.

The doc had an old-fashioned battery radio in the kitchen in one of those dome-shaped stained-wood cabinets. He turned a dial. For a minute nothing happened. Then there was the most God-awful blast of shrieking sound I ever heard in all my life. I jumped half-way to the ceiling. He grinned at me, turned off the radio, said, “You're nervous, Jack. You need a drink. The radio always does that when you first turn it on. I wanted to show you how well-trained the dog is. He hasn't even twitched. You can't even see him breathing. An atom bomb could go off and he wouldn't move until I snap my fingers.”

The old dog hadn't moved. He still looked about as dead as any dead thing I ever saw. But the sudden blast of noise had awakened the old woman. She was calling to him in a croaking voice. The doc said, “Come out here, Marge, and take a look at poor old Pasteur.”

To my drunken eyes, Marge was a shapeless bundle in an old gray wrapper with a pale face and toothless mouth and clouded eyes and wild white hair. She looked like she must be about a hundred. She hobbled slowly toward the kitchen. She walked as stiff as the old dog.

Finally she saw the dog lying there and she let out a bloodcurdling scream, the most awful sound I ever heard. “He's dead!” she shrieked. “He's dead!”

The doc said nothing. He just sat there looking kind of interested, like one of those scientists who do things to white mice.

I couldn't say anything, either. I was too stupefied.

Marge's scream changed to a kind of gurgling in her throat. Her face started turning black, right there in front of my eyes, like she was choking to death. Then she crumpled to the floor, real slow, like one of those trick motion pictures you've seen.

I've lived rough and I've seen some things but that was the most horrible thing I ever saw. Between the booze and the shock I couldn't move. Not for several minutes. I just sat there with my mouth open, kind of gasping.

The doc kneeled down beside the old woman and felt her pulse. Then he went into his room and got a stethoscope and listened to her chest. Finally he got up, cool as you please, and said, “She's dead. The shock was too much, seeing the dog like that. I'll have to call a doctor to issue a death certificate. And then the undertaker.”

He noticed the old dog, still stiff there on his back, and grinned. He snapped his fingers, said, “It's all right now, Pasteur. You did the trick just fine.”

He said to me, “You're sober enough to know what you just saw. A perfectly natural death. An old woman with a heart ailment. She came out here and keeled over with a stroke, a heart attack.”

The old dog finally scrambled to his feet. And I came to life, too. I swung one at the doc. I was so drunk and weak I couldn't have hurt a healthy fly, but it was a fluke punch and it landed right on the point of doc's chin, the button. He went down and his head banged hard. He lay there with his eyes staring up at me and they looked as sightless as the old dog's eyes.

It's hard to say why I swung at him. It wasn't feeling sorry for the old woman made me do it. In a way, her dying was what they call euthanasia, mercy killing. But when I was a kid back in Ohio I had a dog. It was a little fox terrier named Spot. I guess Spot was the only living thing I ever cared much about. I cried my eyes out when he died. I remember that, all right.

What I did next was pure instinct. I stuck the fifth of wine in my pocket. I figured I was going to need it. I'd seen the doc had bills left from his relief check when he paid for the liquor. He'd had them in an old wallet in the inside pocket of his coat. I bent down and got the wallet.
I guess the doc had a weak heart, too. Anyway, when I leaned down to get the wallet my hand was up against his chest. And his heart wasn't beating. I wonder who's going to get the old doll's insurance money. You can buy all the Sneaky Pete on the Bowery with two grand in your jeans.

I picked the old dog up in my arms. He was heavy, but I ran down four flights of steps with him. I brought the old dog here. He's right alongside me now. The dog and the bottle. I had to give the clerk downstairs $5.75 of the doc's money for this cubbyhole I'm in. Six bits for the room rent and five bucks brime for letting me bring the dog up. I guess you could get a big room in the Waldorf-Astoria for that kind of money, but maybe they don't take dogs and winos.

I don't know what I'm going to do about the dog. Maybe I can give him to some home for dogs like the SPCA runs. I don't understand at all why I took the dog in the first place, any more than I understand why I hit the doc. Maybe it was because I remembered my own dog, Spot. Maybe it was because I was afraid the blind and helpless dog would starve to death if I left him up there in the room with two people who couldn't feed him.

Mostly, though, I think it's just that I want to try to make it up to the poor old dog for what the doc did to him. People like the doc and the old doll, Marge, and me don't count. We stumbled over something a long time ago and we took the wrong turn and landed on a street called Skid Row. The doc and the old doll are dead anyway. I'm still young and if it was only the booze with me, maybe I could join Alcoholics Anonymous or something and start all over again. But a city croaker told me some time back that this thing I got in my throat that keeps me from taking big swallows is going to kill me pretty soon, booze or no booze.

But the dog, he's different. All he ever wanted to do was please the doc and this old doll. He's old and crippled and blind and he's got sores on him and he hurts all over, but he kept right on trying to please the doc and the old doll by sitting up on his rump and doing tricks for them.

So I say it's not right what the doc did to the old dog.

He made the dog a murderer, that's what he did.
BUILD ANOTHER COFFIN by HAROLD Q. MASUR

He's crazy!” she said. “Stark, raving mad! How can they let such a man be a private detective? I never saw anybody act like him in all my life. Why, it's ridiculous! He simply hasn't got all his buttons. Do you know what he did, Mr. Jordan?”

“What did he do?”

“He made faces at me and told me to go home.” She expelled a short gasp of utter frustration.

“Please, Mrs. Denney,” I said, “try to relax.”

“Relax?” Her voice went up a full octave. “How can I after talking to such a lunatic?”

What she needed was a shot of brandy to quiet her nerves. I reached behind me into the telephone table and got out the office bottle and poured. “Say when.” But she seemed to have lost her voice, or else she was very thirsty, because I had to quit pouring in order to save my good Napoleon brandy from slopping over the rim of the glass onto the lap of my gray tweed pants.

She drank it like water, with no perceptible effect. Her nostrils were still distended, her bosom continued to heave, and she couldn't find a comfortable spot in the red leather client's chair. She had walked unannounced into my office ten minutes before. Her name was Grace Denney and she was married, which seemed a bit unfair, since an architectural design like hers isn't constructed every day and ought not to be taken out of circulation, though I couldn't blame any man for wanting an exclusive on it.

She was tall, a lithe, sleek, supple item, slender at the hips, rising like an hourglass to emerge burstingly from the square-cut neckline of a simple dress, wondrously and sumptuously assembled. When you came to her face, reluctantly, you saw luminous brown eyes and cherry-red lips, full and shining. From Cleopatra on down, she had them all stopped. Whatever you might need, wherever you were, she had it, in spades. It made no difference, your age or your physical condition, here was a girl who could put spring in an old man's legs and fire in a young man's blood.

Emotional pressure had made her story a little disjointed. I had gathered only that she was from California, that she had written to a private detective named Lester Britt, asking him to find out why an aunt of hers never answered any letters, that she had arrived yesterday, paid a visit on Mr. Britt, and found his behavior most unorthodox, to say the least.

The brandy, I saw, was beginning to work. She settled back in the chair, breathing easier.

“That's better,” I said. “Now, Mrs. Denney, let's get the facts untangled. This aunt of yours, tell me about her.”

She moistened her lips. “Aunt Paula. Mrs. Paula Larsen. She's a widow, about eighty, I'd say, maybe more. She lives at the Vandam Nursing Home on Long Island.”

“Who supports her?”

“Supports her?” Grace Denney snorted politely. “Aunt Paula has annuities that pay her at least five hundred dollars a week. Her husband was my mother's brother. Oscar Larsen, the candy man. Larsen's Fine Chocolates. Stores all over the country. He put all his money into annuities before he retired. And shortly afterward he died.”

“You say you haven't heard from your aunt?”

“Not since she entered that nursing home.”

“How long ago?”
"About two years."

I looked at her curiously. “And you weren't concerned about it until recently?"

She hastened to defend herself. “Let me explain. I used to live with Aunt Paula, until I met Charles. Charles Denney, my husband.” She paused, waiting for me to comment. When I remained silent, she raised a delicate eyebrow. “You never heard of Charles Denney?"

"Should I have?"

"He'd probably think so. Charles was in pictures, until the movies found their tongue. After that he just couldn't seem to click. All they'd give him were minor roles, small bits where he didn't have to talk much. It was quite a blow to Charles. He still fancies himself as an actor and thinks that there is a great Hollywood conspiracy against him."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Here in New York. Aunt Paula didn't like him at all. She thought he was too old for me.” Grace Denney twisted her mouth wryly. "Which he was, of course, but I was too stubborn at the time. Aunt Paula was furious when I went to California with him. She swore she'd never talk to me until I was single again. I wrote once or twice, but she didn't answer, and then I heard indirectly that she had entered this Vandam Nursing home. About a month ago I started writing to her, with no results at all."

"Is that so surprising?" I asked. "You're not single again, are you?"

"No, but I'm going to be. I intend to sue Charles for divorce. I thought that would please Aunt Paula, and I was very surprised when she didn't answer my letters."

"So you hired a private detective, this Lester Britt."

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Because I was worried."

"About what?"

She shrugged vaguely, a troubled look in her eyes. “I can't say exactly. I really don't know. It's just something I feel. And now with this private detective acting so peculiar ... “ She let her voice dwindle uncertainly and caught her full bottom lips between her teeth.

"Who recommended you to this Lester Britt?"

"Nobody. I found his number in a Manhattan directory at the Telephone Exchange."

"What else did he say besides tell you to go home?"

"He said Aunt Paula never wanted to see me again, that she still hated me.” Grace Denney's mouth tightened. “I don't believe it."

"Why didn't you try to see her?"

"I did." Bafflement squirmed in tiny wrinkles across her forehead. I went straight out to that Nursing Home on Long Island. The place is built like a fortress. I spoke to Dr. Albert Vandam, who runs the Home. He told me to wait in the office while he spoke to Aunt Paula. After a few minutes he came back, shrugging his shoulders. He said that she had developed an obsession. She absolutely refused to see me."

"All right,” I said. “I'm a lawyer. What do you want me to do?"
She looked surprised. “Whatever lawyers are supposed to do in such cases. If Aunt Paula has become senile, if she's incompetent to handle her own affairs, don't you think a guardian ought to be appointed?”

"No doubt about it," I said. “Who's supposed to inherit her money?”

"I am. It was all arranged by Uncle Oscar when he set up the annuities."

I looked at her with fresh respect. For looks and personality she already headed the list. Now she rated high on the financial scale too. I smelled a generous fee in the air. Though I would have handled her case anyhow, for a smile and a smaller fee.

"You have just retained yourself a lawyer, Mrs. Denney,” I said and stood up. “Suppose we pay a visit on this Lester Britt and see what he has to say for himself.”

She abandoned the chair with alacrity, a sudden smile warming her face. I got the full brunt of it and I could feel it all the way down to my shoes. “That's what I like,” she said, “a man of action."

We left the office together and she tucked her arm through mine with an easy familiarity, as if we had known each other a long time. She kept step with me across the lobby and I wasn't ashamed to be seen with her. I could feel her pulsing aliveness and the fluid grace of her body.

But not for long.

She gave a sudden start and I felt her stiffen at my side. Then she jerked free and her heels clicked a sharp tattoo on the sidewalk as she steered straight for a man holding up the side of the building. I followed.

"Are you spying on me, Charles?” she demanded acidly. Her eyes were hot and her voice was cold. “When did you come to New York?”

He made a pacifying gesture and smiled affably. “Arrived yesterday, on the same train you did, my sweet.” He flicked his eyes significantly in my direction. “Could I talk to you alone, love?”

"No,” she snapped rudely. “We're all washed up, Charles. I told you that months ago when I left the bungalow. Besides, I'm busy now. This is my lawyer, Scott Jordan.” She indicated the man with a carelessly deprecating gesture. “My husband, Charles Denney.”

"How do you do,” I said.

"Fine,” he said.

I understood now why he would never be a success in talking pictures. There was nothing wrong with his diction, nor with his charm. He looked like an aging playboy, but he spoke like the head chamberlain in a harem.

Grace Denney said between her teeth, “If you insist upon following me, Charles, I'll complain to the police. That kind of publicity can hurt your career. Good-bye.”

He tried to detain her. He reached for her arm. She swung around furiously and slapped his face. A red welt blossomed on his cheek. He cried out in a thin womanly bleat and slapped her back. She gasped and looked stunned.

"Here,” I said. “Let's have no more of that.”

He turned on me, teeth bared. “You stay out of it. She's my wife.”

A crowd of curious onlookers had begun to collect. I took her elbow firmly and said, “Let's go, Grace.”

Charles Denney surprised me. He struck out at the point of my jaw, and the sonovagun was in good condition. My head snapped back with a stab of pain. He was begging for it, so I obliged. I grinned wolfishly and aimed one at his stomach. It was a good shot and I felt my fist sink in to the wrist. Denney's lungs collapsed like a punctured balloon,
and the fight went out of him. He leaned against the building, his face pasty.

I turned and walked Grace to the curb and yanked open the door of a waiting cab, got her installed, climbed in beside her, and the driver gave it the gun. His engine roared and we spurted away.

He swiveled his head. “Hey, you ever fight professionally?”

"Golden gloves."

"Look, buddy, you got a lot of promise in them dukes. I know a manager who can—"

"No soap," I told him. “I'm perfectly satisfied with my own racket."

He looked pained. “Okay,” he said. “Where we going?”

"Give him the address, Grace."

It was all the way down on Park Row, one of those ancient musty seedy buildings that had served its purpose and was marking time until the wreckers pulled it down. Lester Britt had an office on the third floor. The naked-ribbed elevator cage took us up, squealing and groaning on its cables. The hall hadn't seen a janitor's mop in months. Grace made a rabbit's nose and stepped quickly and lightly to a frosted glass door with Britt's name and the legend: Investigations.

She turned the knob and went in. I was right at her heels when she stopped short and I had to clamp my brakes to keep from knocking her over. She was making sick, gurgling noises and trying to backtrack, but I was in the way. Then she turned and buried her face against my shoulder, clinging to me, trembling along the full length of her body. Another time this might have been a pleasant experience.

Not now. Not with this sight.

Now I could see over her shoulder. I saw Mr. Lester Britt, private eye, seated behind his desk, with a letter opener sticking out of his throat at right angles. The blade had failed to seal his wound. His jugular had spurted like a punctured wine gourd, and the whole front of his vest was sticky and viscous with the blood from his emptied veins.

He was a small man with a round face and a balding head. His eyes were glazed and his lips skinned back, leaving his teeth naked to the gums. I knew the kind of private eye he was. His office and everything about him told me. You can buy them for a dollar a dozen, the divorce specialists, the transom peepers, the deadbeat dicks hounding wage slaves who can't meet the last installment on a set of Grand Rapids furniture worth exactly ten percent of the sale price. Lester Britt, with a license in his pocket and a tin badge that permitted him to park anywhere he liked, providing he paid the fine. He had taken a job and bucked some customers who were too fast for him. A knife or a bullet or a broken skull, this was bound to happen to him sooner or later.

Grace Denney was still shivering in my arms like a woman suffering from malaria. But she hadn't screamed and I was thankful for that. “All right,” I said close to her ear. “Let's get out of here.” I almost had to carry her.

I held her hand in the elevator and it was cold as ice. Our first stop was a bar across the street, a small oasis with booths and checkered tableclothes.

"Two double brandies,” I told the waiter.

"I'll take the same," she said.

He gave her a double-take, blinking in surprise, then shrugged and shuffled off to fill the order. I told her to wait and went up front to patronize the telephone booth. I made an anonymous call to Headquarters and hung up. I was in no mood to stick around for a long investigation, trying to convince them I didn't know the answers to any of their questions.

Back at the table, I said, “You all right, Grace?”
She swallowed hugely and nodded.

"Good," I said. "Now listen to me. I have a hunch. What happened to Britt is probably the result of handling your case. That's why he got all worked up when you suddenly appeared at his office yesterday. Chances are he learned something he didn't want you to know. And I think the explanation can be found at the Vandam Nursing Home. I'm going out there."

She tossed off the second brandy like an aspirin tablet. It settled her nerves and put some of the color back in her cheeks. "Can I go along?" she asked.

"If you'll stay in the car and let me handle it."

She nodded quickly. "Of course."

I paid the check and we took a cab uptown to the garage and I got out the Buick. We drove across the Queensboro Bridge, heading out towards the South Shore. Grace Denney was silent, her eyes remote, sitting prim and straight, with her hands folded stiffly in her lap and the wind whipping back through her lustrous ebony hair.

At this time of the day traffic was light and the parkway unraveled swiftly under our wheels. Overhead, the sky was clear, a canopy of rich cobalt, and presently I spied a few seagulls wheeling against the horizon and I knew we were approaching the sea. I saw directions and turned off the main artery and drove along a very narrow macadam road. Every now and then a flash of blue water reeled past and the crisp tang of salt was in the air.

This was a choice expanse of realty, with entrenched wealth in fifteen room chateaus, looking out on their own private botanical gardens.

"This is it," Grace said, stirring at my side.

All I saw was a six foot wall into the top of which had been cemented chunks of broken glass. A pole vaulter might scale the barrier, but the average trespasser would most likely try another route.

"Where's the entrance?" I asked.

"Around the bend."

I pulled up near a wrought iron gate that hung open between a pair of concrete columns, and debarked. I stuck my head through the window on the other side. "I'll try not to be long," I said.

"Be careful," she said, and took my face between her palms and leaned towards me. It was supposed to be a simple kiss of encouragement. But something happened. Our lips met and the contact triggered a whole set of electrical impulses that went through me like a searing flame.

Call it chemistry, anything you like. Sometimes, rarely, it just happens this way. We were a pair of catalytic agents working on each other. The hunger must have been building up inside her for a long time, like a full head of steam in a boiler. A sob caught at her throat and there was a soft sighing exhalation. Her mouth opened on mine, our breaths intermingled, and her fingernails gouged into my shoulders and for a moment there I thought she was going to haul me right through the closed door into the car. Her body seemed to grow tense and I felt my knees grow wobbly.

And then I remembered Lester Britt, sitting up in his office chair, with that piece of steel sticking in his throat, and I broke her grip. It took a bit of doing, but I managed it.

"Not now," I said shakily. "There's work to be done."

She leaned back, her breathing erratic and shallow, her eyes smoldering, unwilling to trust her voice.

I took a long breath and touched her lightly on the cheek and walked past the wrought iron gates along a graveled drive. The building broke into view as I came around a bend. It was dark brown, turreted, solid as a fortress, its
leaded panes glinting dully in the late afternoon sun. A heavy oaken door was closed and looked impregnable. There was no bell, no knocker, nothing but a pull cord, which I gave a hard tug.

The door opened wide enough to show me a female face as thin as a hatchet and just as sharp. She was a tall, muscular woman, forty or so, in a starched white nurse's uniform. She was in the wrong profession. The milk of human kindness had long since curdled in her eyes.

"Yes?" Her voice was short and reedy. "What is it?"

"Dr. Vandam, please."

"The doctor's busy," she said unpleasantly and started to close the door in my face.

But I had my foot in the doorway and she looked down at it, surprised. I put some steel into my voice. "Dr. Vandam," I said. "Don't make me ask you again. Where is he?"

She gave me a look of cold hostility, turned on her heel, and said abrasively, "This way."

I followed her through a wide lobby and down an uncarpeted corridor to another oaken door. She knocked on this, opened it, and said, "This person wishes to see you, doctor. He practically forced his way in."

Dr. Vandam stood up from behind his desk, a bony man with an angular face, aggrieved eyes, and a perpetually worried mouth. This was the expression he presented to the public. What went on behind it, I couldn't even guess. "Come in, sir," he said in a deceptively mild voice. "Come in and sit down." He pulled a chair around so that the light would strike my face. "You mustn't mind Miss Kirk," he said. "We're short-handed and she has to do most of the work." He peered at me owlishly. "I don't believe I've ever seen you before. Are you selling something?"

"Not exactly, doctor." I had ignored the proffered chair. "I came to see one of your patients."

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Paula Larsen."

There was no visible change in his expression. "Are you a relative?"

"No, doctor."

"Friend of the family?"

"No, doctor."

He moved his shoulders patiently. "Then what is the purpose of your visit, if I may inquire? Mrs. Larsen is resting now. She had a touch of flu last month and she's very weak."

"I'd like to talk to her."

He smiled patronizingly. "My dear fellow, we can't allow just anyone to walk in and disturb our guests. Surely you realize that."

I fished one of my cards out of my wallet and gave it to him. His lips moved as he read it. His eyes came up without any expression.

"I see," he said. "You're a lawyer. What, exactly, do you want, counselor? Who do you represent?"

"Mrs. Grace Denney. We want to find out if Mrs. Larsen is competent to handle her own affairs."

He stroked his closed eyelids with infinite weariness. "Ah, yes. Mrs. Denney was here yesterday, but Mrs. Larsen refused to see her. He shoved his chair back abruptly and came to his feet. "I think an interview can be managed. Suppose we just walk in on Mrs. Larsen. But please make it brief, counselor. Follow me." His manner had turned
crisp and businesslike.

A spiral staircase wound upward to the second floor. Our footsteps were absorbed on the well-padded broadloom. Dr. Vandam paused at the end of the corridor, opened a door, and walked in with a cheerful smile.

"Well, Mrs. Larsen, you're looking chipper. How do you feel this afternoon?"

"Resting nicely, doctor. I—" She stopped when she noticed he was not alone and her faded eyes regarded me curiously.

I saw a small woman, very old, lying in a four poster, dwarfed by its hugeness. Her skin was wrinkled parchment and her hair was snow white. Only the porcelain dentures anchored to her gums kept her mouth from collapsing upon itself.

"I brought you a visitor," Dr. Larsen said.

She searched my face, probing, trying to recollect if she knew me.

"How do you do, Mrs. Larsen," I said. "I'm a friend of Grace's."

The gnarled fingers tightened on the coverlet and her withered lips contracted. "Then you're no friend of mine," she said.

"Grace would like very much to see you, Mrs. Larsen."

"Well, I don't want to see her. Why doesn't she leave me alone and go back to California?"

I said quietly, "She's divorcing Charles."

Her eyes closed, as if the light hurt them. "Poor Charles. Grace must have made him very unhappy."

"Please," Dr. Vandam broke in firmly. "I'm sorry, but you can see that Mrs. Larsen is very tired. She needs rest and this excitement isn't doing her any good."

I smiled, first at him, then at her, and now I gave them both the shock of their lives.

"That's too goddam bad about her," I said unpleasantly. "Get up out of that bed, you old fraud. And get some clothes on, unless you want me to drag you down to Police Headquarters in your nightgown."

Her mouth fell open. She gaped at me, dumbfounded, her eyes dark with apprehension and dismay. Dr. Vandam stood with his spine arched, his larynx paralyzed, speechless and staring. There were incoherent sounds in his throat that finally became words:

"What—what—what is the meaning of this?"

I was playing a hunch and I hoped I was right.

I said with acid precision, "Who do you think you're kidding? This isn't Mrs. Larsen. This woman is a phoney, a substitute, a ringer."

His Adam's apple bobbed erratically. "But Mrs. Larsen—where—"

"Dead, probably," I said. "And kept a secret so this old bag could take her place."

He seemed at a complete loss. "I—I don't understand. Why?"

"In order to keep receiving those annuity payments. Five hundred smackers a week. Twenty-five thousand a year. It adds up, friend. If they could get away with it for only four years it's a hundred grand." I looked at her stonily. "Get up, lady. You won't have long to spend in jail. You're too old."
But she wasn't as old as she looked. She kicked her feet over the side of the bed and stood up, trembling and agitated. Her mouth was working and her quivering finger pointed at the doctor.

"He made me do it!" she shouted. "He hired me and asked me to play the part. I don't know about any annuities. I don't—"

Vandam cut her short with a snarl. "Shut up!" His eyes were glazed, abnormally bright as he turned on me, trying to pull himself erect. "These premises are private. You have no right here."

But it was only surface courage, an attitude of desperation. Inside, he was demoralized. He knew the game was up.

"You didn't coach her well enough," I said. "Mrs. Larsen never told you about Grace and Charles, or why she had fought with her niece. She slipped on that one."

The muscles in his angular face were out of control, warping his mouth.

"Mrs. Larsen died," I said. "You thought she was alone in the world. She never told you about Grace. It must have been a shock when the letters started coming. Because the die had already been cast. She was dead and you thought you saw a chance to make some easy money. Instead of reporting it, you buried her quietly and secretly out in the garden somewhere. You accepted the checks and counterfeited her signature on the indorsements." I showed him my teeth. "Or did greed make you impatient, doctor? Perhaps you couldn't wait for her to die from old age. Maybe you accelerated the event. An autopsy will tell that part of the story when the police find her."

Pallor diluted his complexion. Whatever control he had left was rapidly dissolving, disorganizing his thoughts. He sought desperately to salvage some remnants of his honor. "No, no," he whispered hoarsely, "it—it wasn't me. I didn't kill her. She received a box of chocolates in the mail." He swallowed painfully, like a man with the mumps. "Arsenic. I kept the wrapper."

"Where did the candy come from?"

"San Diego."

"I believe you," I said. "You didn't kill Mrs. Larsen. It was somebody else. But just the same you're going to sit in that electric chair up in Sing Sing."

He staggered back, cringing away from me. Beads of sweat condensed along his brow. His nostrils were pinched and gray.

"You killed somebody else," I said. "Lester Britt. He was hired to find out why the old lady had failed to answer any letters. He investigated and fell onto your scheme and started to blackmail you. That was all right, until Grace Denney arrived in New York. Britt was panicked. He was a small timer who had an easy touch and he was afraid the girl would put an end to it. So he came to you, for a quick kill, trying to up the ante. You understood about blackmailers, doctor. You knew that sort of thing was endless. It got progressively worse. You were desperate. Britt had to be eliminated. So you went to his office and you did what had to be done. And you hired this old lady in case the girl asked someone else to investigate."

His lips moved soundlessly. The truth was there in his distorted face for anyone to see. He backed away blindly through the door.

I didn't bother to chase after him. What the hell for? If he wanted to commit suicide, let him. It would save the State a lot of trouble.

I looked at the old lady. "Get away from here," I told her. "Get away from here as fast as you can."

I took the same advice for myself.

I was halfway to the car when I heard the shot, a muffled report, absorbed in space.
Dr. Vandam had appealed his case to a higher authority.

Grace was waiting in the car, with the radio playing. Dinner music from some hotel, soft and muted. There were people who still led normal lives. I climbed in beside her and started the car. She twisted around to face me while I drove.

"What is it?" she asked. "You look strange. Did you see Aunt Paula."

"No," I said.

"But you spoke to Dr. Vandam."

"Yes," I said.

She clutched urgently at my sleeve. "What happened, Scott?"

I ignored the question and asked one of my own. "Do you ever go to San Diego, Grace?"

Her forehead was puckered. "Occasionally. I have friends there. Why?"

"How about Charles? Does he ever go there?"

"I imagine so. It isn't too far from Hollywood."

"I'd like to talk to him. Where do you think he's staying?"

"At the Selwyn, probably, on East 48th Street. What is it, Scott? Please tell me."

"Later," I said. "I want to think for a moment."

I drove back to Manhattan too fast and too recklessly. When we reached our destination, I parked in the only space available, beside a fire hydrant.

We entered the lobby and Grace got Denney's room number from the desk clerk. An elevator took us up to the eighth floor. I stood to one side when she knocked.

His voice came through, sounding cautious. "Who is it?"

"It's me, Charles, Grace. Please open the door."

No key could have opened the door so quickly. A smile of welcome was forming on his face. It died when he saw me and he started to slam the door shut. I hit it with my shoulder, driving him backward into the room. He tried to stop me but couldn't.

His mouth hardened. "Now look here, shyster—"

Even in the lexicon of a mule skinner there is no epithet more calculated to make my blood go to the boiling point.


The words hit him like a physical blow. I could read the look of doom in his suddenly transformed face.

For a moment he stood rigid, the muscles pulling his face out of shape, and then he spun away from me toward a kitchenette at the rear. He had the bread knife out before I could grab him. He brandished it aloft, like a hammer in his fist.

Grace's hands flew to her mouth, plugging up the scream which was forcing itself out.
I backed slowly away, talking to him.

"A box of chocolates," I said. "You sent them to Mrs. Larsen, spiked with arsenic."

He didn't speak. His eyes were live coals, searing with hate. He stood motionless, the long steel saw-toothed blade glittering under the light.

"California has a community property law," I said. "Each spouse is entitled to half the property. You knew that Grace was planning to get a divorce, and you poisoned her aunt so she would inherit without delay. But Vandam crossed you up. He kept the death a secret."

Charles Denney moved then. He sprang forward and the knife made a flashing arc that would have laid me open like a side of beef.

I threw myself sideways and felt a burning flame along my arm. I stumbled and fell and rolled over on my back. Denney was over me now, breathing hoarsely, nothing human in his eyes. He raised the blade for a final thrust. But he waited a second too long.

My feet caught him at the pit of the stomach, with all the leverage of the powerful muscles a man has in his thighs.

Denney went up in the air and flew backward, crashing against the wall. I scrambled to my feet and reached him in a single jump. His eyes were glazed and I picked one up from the basement and threw it at him with all the strength I had. I never threw anything harder.

It nailed him along the side of his jaw and he toppled over with a grunt and lay still.

I kicked the knife away. "It's all over," I told Grace. "Take it easy."

But she had no intention of fainting. "Shall I call the police?"

"If you please."

It took almost an hour to set them straight on the story. When they finally released us, I took Grace's arm and led her out to the elevator.

"Have I earned a fee?"

"You certainly have," she said emphatically.

"Okay. I'm taking you home to collect."

I felt pretty good. I didn't even get mad when I found a cop downstairs writing out a parking ticket for my Buick.

I merely asked him to hurry.

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I'm afraid to go home tonight.

I'll go, of course. To a modern, lovely house on Coquina Beach overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. The beach is not the habitat of paupers.

A singularly beautiful and devoted woman waits for me there. Doreen. My wife.

We are ring leaders in a smart cocktail set. We get special service whenever we go into a beach restaurant. Everything has worked perfectly. No one on the beach suspects how we came into our money.

To an outsider I might well be a person to envy. Yet I would give five years of my life if I could escape going home tonight.

Doreen was unaware of the jam I was in when we went on that hunting trip together six months back. We had been married only a few weeks at the time, after getting acquainted during a business trip I took to Atlanta.

She was still pretty much of a stranger to me, and she was such an intense person I didn't know how she would take the news.

We'd had a wonderful time on the trip. Few women would have taken the dark, tangled swamp, the south Georgia heat as Doreen had. Snakes, alligators, they didn't faze her. Neither had the panther.

We were in Okeefanokee hunting deer. I'd struck the panther's spoor in late afternoon. I'd wanted Doreen to turn back, but she'd looked at me strangely.

"Enos," she said, "I never suspected you'd be afraid of anything. You're big, ugly, direct, blunt, hardheaded, cruel—or is that only a front?" She finished with a short laugh, but there was a seriousness beneath her words.

"I'm not afraid for myself," I said.

"Then never be afraid for me," she said excitedly. "Come on, Enos, I want to see you get this cat."

I jumped the cat twenty minutes later. As it came out of a clump of palmetto and saw grass I put a 30-30 slug in her. My aim was a trifle high. The panther screamed, pinwheeled in the air, and came at me, a crazed mass of fury and hatred.

Doreen stood her ground and waited for me to shoot the cat. When the beast lay still and prone, it was I who had to wipe sweat from my face.

Doreen walked to the cat slowly. Blood on the animal's hide was already beginning to draw flies and gnats.

"See, Enos," Doreen said, "some of it is still pumping out of her, the hot, red life. Wasn't she beautiful in death?"

I shivered. "Yeah," I said. "Yeah. Let's get back to camp."

We returned to camp and Doreen cooked our supper. Rabbit on a wooden spit and sourdough biscuits.

When we had eaten, we retired to our tent behind mosquito netting. Around us the swamp was coming to life. Its music was a symphony with tones ranging from the shrill of crickets to the basso of the frogs. The swamp rustled and sighed and screamed occasionally.

Doreen slipped into my arms. "You were wonderful with the cat today, Enos."

Thinking of it, her breath quickened and I could feel her heart beating against me.
"I've shot 'em before," I said.

She pulled my chin around with her thumb and forefinger. "I don't interest you a bit at the moment, Enos," she stated. "What's bothering you?"

"A business detail. Nothing for you to worry about."

"I'm your wife," she said. "Tell me."

"All right," I said looking directly into her eyes. They were large and dark. In the dim light of the lantern her pupils were dilated and as black as the glossy midnight color of her hair.

"I'm in trouble," I added after a moment. "Serious trouble. I might even be yanked into prison."

"Why?"

"I've taken some money that doesn't belong to me."

"From whom?"

"Sam Fickens."

"Your business partner," she said.

"That's right. You know we've been spending at a heavy clip, Doreen. The house was costly. A good buy, you don't find many old colonials on an estate any more. But costly."

"You're sorry, Enos?"

"I'm not sorry for a thing," I said. "Except that money ran short. Sam and I had this deal with the Birmingham company coming up. My share would cover the shortage. But the deal blew up. And Sam discovered the shortage the day before you and I left on this trip. He told me to go ahead and take the trip—and use it to figure out whether I want to make him sole owner of the company or spend a few years in prison."

"Why, the dirty snake," Doreen said, not without a degree of admiration in her voice. "It's nothing short of blackmail."

"True."

"You're not going to let him get away with it, are you?"

"What can I do?"

She looked at me oddly. "You're asking me. You, a man, asking a woman?"

I colored a little. "I told you not to worry your head with it. I'll figure something out."

She lay back on her cot. I smoked a cigarette. I was lighting a second from it when she said, "Enos?"

"Yes?"

"If anything happened to Sam what would happen to the business?"

"I'd get his share. It's not an unusual partnership arrangement."

"Well, you didn't hesitate when that cat was coming after you this afternoon, did you?"

I went cold under the muggy sweat on my body. "You mean kill Sam."
"You've killed before, haven't you?"

"That was war."

"This is too. What's the difference? A stranger with a yellow skin is out to kill you in a jungle. You kill him first. Everybody says wonderful, good guy, well done. Now a man is hunting you in a jungle of sorts—and with dirty weapons. You owe it to both of us to protect yourself."

"The difference is in a little thing called the law, Doreen."

She threw back her head and laughed, raised on her elbows and sat looking at me until I glanced away.

Then she turned on her side away from me. "I really thought I'd married a man with guts, Enos." She sounded genuinely hurt, disappointed. And I'd been afraid of how she would react to the news that I'd embezzled some money.

I turned in, but I didn't sleep. I lay there listening to the swamp, aware of her an arm's length away.

Finally I said, "How would you go about it?"

"How'd you know I wasn't asleep, Enos?"

"I could tell. I asked you a question."

"Well, I'd do it with witnesses. Then I'd call the law, hand over the gun, and stand trial. That way, when you walk out of the courtroom, a free man, there can never be any kickbacks."

"Just like that, huh? I'm going to confess to a murder and get off scot free?"

She sat up and turned to face me. Her face had changed. It was as if the angles and bones had shifted to form new shadows. She laughed, soft and low.

"Who said anything about murder, Enos? You know your people here in south Georgia. You know their code, the way they live, their outlook. Do you think a jury of such men will condemn another man for protecting the sanctity of his home?"

I wanted to tell her to stop talking right now. I didn't want to think about killing Sam. He was a hard, greedy cookie without much mercy in his makeup, but he ... Well, he had me in a corner.

He would use any weapon at hand. He'd proved that.

I'd worked hard. My part of the business was worth plenty. Sam was a swine, grabbing his chance to take it all.

It was really his fault. He was leaving me no out. He knew I wouldn't face prison.

He'd asked for it....

He wasn't in the office the day I got back to Mulberry. It was four o'clock before he came in. I heard him in the outer office talking to Miss Sims, our secretary, and then the door of our private office opened to admit him.

"Hello, Enos. Sims said you were back."

He was a big, florid, meaty man. Meaty lips, hands, nose. His brows and hair were pale red. Sims had said he'd been out to the turpentine fields all day inspecting a new lease.

"How does the lease look?" I asked.

He gave me a smug grin. "You think the lease really concerns you, Enos?"
I studied his face. All I could see was a man gloating. “I’d hoped you’d softened your attitude, Sam.”

His laugh was his reply.

“You know I can make that few thousand up in a matter of weeks, Sam. We’ve been in business ... “

“And business is business, Enos.” A sneer came into his eyes. “You should have thought of that. I needed a partner when we started this company.”

“And you don’t now?”

“Not a stinking crook. No, I don’t need that kind of partner.” He sat down behind his desk. “What’ll it be, Enos? Sign the papers? Or go to jail?”

“I don’t hanker to be locked up, Sam.”

“No,” he said acidly. “I was sure you wouldn’t. You’re too great a lover of life for that, too much the gladhanded popularity guy.”

It struck me that he hated me, had always hated me. To him, in this case, business was going to be a pleasure.

“I'll make one last appeal, Sam ... “

“Save it. I've said all I’m going to.”

“But I’ll say it anyhow. You know what my portion of the company is worth. Many times the few thousand I borrowed ... “

“Stole, Enos, that's the word.”

I drew in a breath while he sat and watched me and enjoyed himself.

“Well,” I said. “Surely you could pay a few thousand more ... “

“You've had every dime you're going to get for your share, Enos. That's it. Now make up your mind. We either have the papers signed before noon tomorrow or I'm swearing out a warrant.”

I sat and looked at him for a minute. But I didn't need to make a decision. It had been made all ready. It was seething in my blood and flashing hotly across my brain.

“Have you mentioned any of this to another living soul?” I asked.

“No.”

“If I make this sacrifice,” I said, “I'll be doing it to keep my name absolutely clean.”

“I know that,” he said. “I know it's my lever, my weapon, Enos. Made up your mind?”

I stood and nodded. “Come out to the house tonight. About eight. I have an errand to do, but Doreen will be there. You can chin with her if I'm late. Have a drink, if you like. I guess we might as well settle this with as little rancor as possible.”

“That's sensible talk, Enos. I'm glad you're taking it this well.”

“What can I do?”

“Not a damn thing,” he said in huge enjoyment. “Don't worry. I'll be there. Waiting for you.”

Early that evening I drove over to Macon to see a cousin who had been ill for some time. He was surprised and glad
to see me. We made small talk for an hour or so. Business. My marriage. The weather. I left with a promise that I'd bring Doreen and we'd have a real old-fashioned Georgia watermelon cutting sometime soon.

I was back in Mulberry by nine-thirty. Driving through the elm and maple-lined back streets in the darkness I felt tension building in me. There was a thickness in my throat and a tingling in the tips of my fingers. The large, old houses, set beyond wide lawns, were peaceful, serene.

At the edge of town I turned left, picked up the sideroad that ran to The Willows, the fine old place I'd bought for Doreen.

I drove down the dark tunnel with weeping willows on either side. Then my headlights picked up the house, the wide veranda, the white columns. A portion of the downstairs was lighted.

I parked in the driveway beside the house, cut the lights, opened the glove compartment, and transferred the .38 revolver to the side pocket of my coat.

I found Sam and Doreen in the front parlor of the house. A pig about everything, Sam had partaken well of the brandy from the bottle on the sideboard.

His eyes were heavy-lidded, his face reddish purple with blood. He looked up at me and grinned. “You took long enough, Enos.”

"But I'm here now," I said. “Everything all set, I suppose.” Doreen had risen to stand behind Sam. She nodded. Sam said everything was set. His words meant nothing. Her nod was what interested me.

Only minutes of life remained to Sam now. I tried to keep from thinking about it. My knees were weak, and my mouth was so dry I wondered if I could get the next words out.

"Okay," I said. “Come on and we'll get it over with.”

Doreen started from the room. Her eyes were glinting as if sheened with satin.

Sam sat a moment, shrugged, and got up.

We went down a corridor. Doreen opened a door on a dark room.

We entered and I heeled the door closed. I palmed the gun and pulled it out of my pocket.

Doreen switched on the light.

Sam started. “Hell, this isn't an office or a den—it's a bedroom!”

I heard Doreen breathing. “That's right, Sam,” she said softly.

He turned to look at her, and I let him have it. Another five seconds and the last of my nerve would have been gone. I had to do it then.

The bullet hit him in the left temple, ranged upward, and left a hole the size of a half dollar when it came out of his skull.

And yet he didn't die immediately. He lived for perhaps five seconds. He twitched, the breath rattled in his throat. He half-turned himself on the carpet where he lay. Then he was dead.

Doreen had watched every bit of it. She was half-kneeling, to watch the final flick of light fade from his face. She rose, and in her face and eyes was a rapt expression.

I felt like shaking at her, yelling at her.

She turned her face toward me, her eyes trying to focus through the fever in them. She didn't seem to know where
she was for a moment. Then she started laughing, low and soft.

"Cut it out!" I said. "Doreen—stop it!"

She brushed her glossy hair away from her temples with both hands. "Hello, Enos. Dear Enos. I feel higher than the proverbial Georgia pine right now. Did you see it, the way death came creeping over him? He fought, Enos. Every cell of him wanted to live. But we had that power over him, didn't we? The power to smash the life out of him ... "

This was the worst moment yet. I felt sweat running down the sides of my face.

I grabbed her by the shoulder and slapped her across the cheek. She didn't seem to feel the blow, but her eyes cleared a little.

"There's still a lot to be done," I said. "We haven't much time."

I ripped her blouse across the shoulder and struck her again so that my finger marks were on her cheek. Doreen said nothing.

"I've got to make the phone call now," I said. "Sure you're okay?"

She nodded. "Give me a cigarette."

I gave her a cigarette. "Come on," I said.

She was still looking at Sam over her shoulder as I pulled her from the room.

In the front parlor, I steadied myself and dialed Dolph Crowder's number.

The sheriff answered on the second ring.

"Dolph," I said, "this is Enos Mavery. I think you better come out to The Willows right away."

"What's the trouble, Enos?"

"I've just shot and killed Sam Fickens."

I heard him take an explosive breath. Then he said in a tight but quiet tone, "I'll be there in five minutes."

He was as good as his word. In five minutes he was pounding on the front door. I had used the time to burn and flush into non-existence the papers Sam had brought with him tonight, the papers giving him full control of the company.

I gave Doreen a glance. Her eyes were clear now, her face composed.

I opened the front door just as Dolph started to knock again. He was a thin, long-faced man. Ice blue eyes. Long, sharp nose, razor keen jaw.

"Where is he, Enos?"

"In my wife's bedroom," I said. "Here's the gun."

I handed him the revolver. He looked at it, sniffed at it, dropped it in his pocket and stepped into the hallway. He nodded a greeting to Doreen, not missing the finger marks on her face, the tear in her blouse.

"Which way?" he asked.

"I'll show you," I said. Doreen started with us. "You stay here," I told her.

"Enos, I ... "
"Stay here!" I didn't know exactly why. But I didn't want her to look at the dead man again. More precisely, I feared, for some reason, having Dolph see her if she should look at him.

Dolph and I went back to the bedroom.

Dolph stood looking down at Sam for several seconds. "You did one hell of a complete and messy job, Enos."

"I meant to—at the time. When I came in here and saw what he was trying to do I didn't think of but one thing, Dolph. The same thing you and any other man around here would think of."

"I see," he said softly. "Better tell me the rest of it."

"There isn't much to tell," I said. "Sam knew I was going to Macon tonight. He came here in my absence on a pretext he wanted to talk to me about business. He was already pretty well boiled. My wife let him in—after all, he was my business partner. He had a brandy in the front parlor, she told me. Then he began to want to get cozy. When she ordered him out, he got pretty vile and coarse with his talk. To escape him, she came back here. She couldn't get the door locked, he was too close behind her, telling her what a fool she was for marrying a homely mug like me, how much more he could do for her, how many nights he'd lain awake just thinking about her."

I paused for breath. Dolph waited patiently.

"You ought to be able to piece the rest of it together," I said. "I heard her scream. She was trying to get away from Sam when I came in the room. I tell you, Dolph, I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I heard him laughing at her, telling her to be nice, to be sweet to him ... that kind of stuff."

"I went for him. To tell you the truth, I meant to strangle him. He shoved me to one side. I was off balance and stumbled against the bureau. I don't remember getting the gun ... it was in the bureau drawer. I don't even remember shooting him, but I did. One minute he was there; then he was on the floor and I was standing over him cussing him for everything I could lay my tongue to. Then I saw he was dead and that knocked me back into kilter. I phoned you—and that's it."

"You have any trouble with Sam before this?" Dolph Crowder asked.

"No. I never liked him much as a person. But who did?"

Dolph nodded. "The town thought of him as a pig. A greedy one at that. A sort of smug, self-sufficient man who figured anything he wanted was his just because he was Sam Fickens."

"I know all that, Dolph. But I never let him get under my skin before. We had a growing company. We were making money. I didn't care too much what he was like."

"He ever come around here before when you were gone?"

"Once or twice," I said. "Doreen told me. She didn't like him. Said he gave her the willies."

"How about when you were here?"

"Come to think of it, he's been a lot more sociable since I got married ... But I don't think he'd have pulled this act tonight if he hadn't been drunk. I swear, Dolph, I'm sorry now I did it. I should have just beat him up and thrown him out. But for a few seconds there I didn't know what I was doing ... coming home ... hearing her scream ... walking in to see him ... "

"Don't dwell on it," Dolph said. "I'll have to take you into town."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Your wife will have to make a statement, of course."
"I know you're just doing your job, Dolph."

I had a private cell in the local pokey that night. Dolph's wife brought me a fine breakfast next morning, country ham, redeye gravy, grits swimming in butter, eggs, hot biscuits, steaming coffee.

That breakfast did more than fill my stomach. It fed my mental state. It told me the whole town was buzzing—with the talk in my favor.

I was charged with manslaughter and out on bail before noon. Folks in town did their best to talk and act as if I had no charge hanging over me. Doreen was relaxed, in good spirits, contented as a cat that's had a big bowl of warm milk.

I went on trial in circuit court the fifth day of the following month. When the trial opened, I had my lawyer ask the judge if I could make a statement to the court. The request was granted.

I got to my feet, conscious of the packed courtroom. I walked quietly to the stand, the same Enos Mavery they'd known all my life, the Enos who paused to crack a joke or a fruit jar of corn. The Enos who could talk to a dirt farmer as well as a fellow member of our country club.

I was sworn in and sat down in the witness chair.

"Folks," I said, "I don't see much point in dragging this thing out. We're all taxpayers and every hour this court sits costs us money.

"Clay Rogers is a fine prosecutor. I ought to know. I went to school with him. He's going to tell you that I shot Sam Fickens. Now old Clay ain't givin' to lying, and I don't deny it. I sure did shoot him—and I guess I might do it again under the same circumstances. I came home that night and found the dirty skunk using his brute strength on my wife. I went as crazy as a loon, got my hands on a gun, and pulled the trigger. I didn't try to hide a thing, and I'm not trying to now. I got Dolph Crowder on the phone soon as I saw what I had done, and I'm here now to tell you I did it. The man entered my home under a pretext, followed my wife when she tried to get away, forced himself into the bedroom—and I'm just thankful I got there when I did. If that makes me a criminal, then justice in the state of Georgia ain't what I've always thought it to be ... I thank you."

There was more testimony. From Dolph, Doc Joyner, who is coroner in his spare time, from several people who had known Sam. And from Doreen. She simply backed up what I had said. She was dressed as always, attractively, making no pretense that she wasn't a beautiful woman.

The jury was out for an hour.

I walked out of the courtroom a free and rich man.

Doreen and I sold out a few weeks later. She was restless, and I had no real desire to live in Mulberry longer.

We toured Florida and decided on the Coquina Beach place. For awhile it appeared life might settle to normal, but when we were through the decorating, the hundred and one things in establishing a new residence that kept us busy, Doreen became restless again.

I tried everything. Cocktail parties—they were too vapid. Another hunting trip—but a bleeding animal held no more interest for her.

Doreen hired a yard man last week and fixed up quarters over the garage for him. But we don't really need a full-time yard man. I looked into his background. A bum. From the downtown waterfront and wino jungles. Comes from nowhere.

But I suspect where he is going. It's been building in Doreen for quite awhile now. And I don't know what to do. If I warned the yard man, somebody else would be marked.

Somebody's going to die—to provide a thrill for Doreen. Nothing less will calm that mounting restlessness.
I certainly am afraid to go home tonight.

THE END

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